



Helping Health Anxiety

Module I

Understanding Health Anxiety

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Introduction

From time to time, we will all worry about things like relationships, work, finances, and, of course, our health. Everyone, at some point or another, will notice sensations or changes in their bodies, will wonder whether they could have a serious medical problem, and will take steps to relieve their health worries and concerns. However, there is a difference between general concern about health, which we all have from time to time, and more problematic health anxiety.

Are you a person who finds that you worry a great deal about your health? Have you noticed that your effort to find answers for your symptoms is impacting on you in a negative way? If so, you may want to keep reading these “Helping Health Anxiety” Modules.

The aim of this current module is to provide you with some general information about health anxiety, to discover whether health anxiety is a problem for you, and to discuss the negative impacts of health anxiety.

What Is Health?

Before we talk about health anxiety, it is important that we first consider what “health” is and to recognise that health means different things to different people.

Many people will consider health to mean the absence of disease, injury or disability. However, the meaning of health changes from person to person, and across cultures and continents. For example, an extremely fit athlete might consider themselves to be unhealthy if they suffer an injury that prevents them from training. However, a person with a diagnosed condition, such as diabetes or asthma, could consider themselves as healthy if they are managing their condition well.

Most definitions of health therefore extend beyond the concept of a mere absence of disease, injury or disability, to include a person’s state of physical, mental and social functioning. Most importantly, rather than thinking about health in black and white terms (i.e., we either *have* or *don’t have* health in these areas), most definitions of health consider these three areas of functioning to be on a continuum ranging from very poor to excellent.

Before we go any further, take a few moments to describe your overall health

Now notice how you described your health. What did you focus on? What aspects of health stood out as being the most important to you? Did you consider you physical, mental *and* social functioning and wellbeing?



What Is Health Anxiety?

Anxiety comes about at times when we think something bad might or will happen. This is actually a survival instinct and can be particularly helpful for us in real life-threatening situations. For example, if you are confronted by a dangerous animal it is helpful for your brain to recognise the threat and to tell your body to run, hide, or get ready to fight. Your body will therefore go through a range of physiological changes known as the “fight or flight” response, which helps to prepare our bodies and protect us from danger.



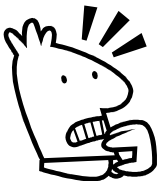
There are times however when we can experience an anxiety response due simply to a *perceived threat*. Have you been concerned that others might dislike a speech you are about to give and noticed your heart beating faster? Have you ever walked through a dark alley at night and felt tense while worrying that something bad might happen? In both of these situations something bad may or may not happen, but what is important, is that if you *believe* there is some danger you will usually feel some level of anxiety.

Health anxiety therefore refers to the experience of thinking that there may be a threat to your health, which consequently triggers your anxiety response.

While we may think and worry about any number of health related issues, some of the more common health related fears include having or developing cancer, Alzheimer’s Disease, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, a mental illness such as schizophrenia, a thyroid disorder, or that you may have a heart attack. Not everyone thinks about specific problems though. Your fears could be more general, in that you simply think that something is “not quite right”.

In what ways do you worry about your health? What would you consider to be the greatest threats to your overall health? Do you worry about particular physical symptoms? Is there a particular health problem, illness or disease that you are concerned (or even convinced) that you may have now or will develop in the future?

In some cases, the fear we have may even be about the health of a loved one. For example, a parent who has noticed their child is tired frequently may become worried that their child has leukaemia, or a person who has noticed that their partner has been coughing frequently may begin to worry that they have lung cancer. While these modules are directed at worries you may have about your own health, most of the exercises could also be also used if you are anxious about the health of a loved one.



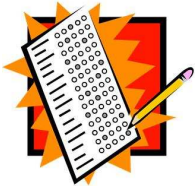
When is Health Anxiety a Problem?

To a certain extent, milder forms of health anxiety can affect us all from time to time. Who hasn't been concerned when we are waiting for some test results to come back, or had some worrisome thoughts about a new lump or bump that we have noticed? So, at what point does mild health anxiety become a problem? While having concerns about your health and seeking advice and appropriate health checks are something that all human beings experience, as with anything, too much of something can be bad for you.

Health concerns can become a problem when they:

- are **excessive**,
- are **out of proportion** to the realistic likelihood of having an actual and serious medical problem
- are **persistent** despite negative test results and/or reassurance from your health practitioner,
- lead to **unhelpful behaviours** such as excessive checking, reassurance seeking (e.g., from doctors, family or friends), or avoidance (e.g., of check-ups, doctors, health related information), and
- cause you significant **distress**, or **impair** your ability to go about your day-to-day life.

This is when normal health concerns become *health anxiety*. From this point forward, when we talk about health anxiety, we will be referring to problematic levels of health anxiety.



Let's find out if health anxiety is an issue for you. Here are a few statements for you to consider:

	Never	Occasionally	Often	Very Often
I worry about my health				
I worry that I may have or will develop a serious medical problem				
I worry that bodily sensations/changes are a sign of a serious medical problem				
I find it difficult to control or let go of my health worries				
I mentally scan my body and/or mind for signs that something is wrong				
I focus my attention on my bodily sensations or symptoms				
I have difficulty concentrating on things other than my bodily sensations or symptoms				
I physically check my body for symptoms and changes				
I frequently visit health professionals (e.g., GPs, specialists) to discuss my health concerns and symptoms or to have tests performed				
I avoid health professionals (e.g., GPs, specialists) as I am too worried about my health and/or test results				
I have continued to worry about my health despite my doctor's reassurance or despite negative tests				
I search for information about my symptoms (e.g., on the internet, in books, in pamphlets from health clinics)				
I discuss my symptoms with family and/or friends				
I avoid people, places or activities that trigger off health worries				
I avoid people, places or activities that trigger off particular physical sensations				

If you have answered most of the above questions with Often or Very Often, then health anxiety might be something you want to work on. Even if you have only answered Often or Very Often for a few of the above statements, you may still want to stay with us as you might learn some skills that could be useful in the future.

BUT I HAVE REAL SYMPTOMS?!?!

It is important to recognise that health anxiety can exist in people who are “healthy”, in people who are experiencing real yet unexplained medical symptoms, and in people who have an existing and diagnosed medical condition. This means that the physical symptoms you experience that are at the centre of your health anxiety are not “all in your head”.

Whether or not you have real symptoms or an actual medical condition is not the main issue when it comes to health anxiety. The issue is how you are responding to and coping with your symptoms or condition. If you respond to health issues or symptoms with excessive and persistent worrying, checking, reassurance seeking or avoidance, then health anxiety may still be a problem.



Negative Impacts of Health Anxiety

Health anxiety can impact on us in numerous negative ways. Below are the most common areas affected by health anxiety.

Relationships with family / friends. Time spent worrying about your health or seeking help from professionals may impact on your ability to socialise or attend to important family matters. Family and friends may join you in your worrying, leading to everyone feeling more distressed. On the other hand, they may become frustrated with you if you continue to worry despite negative test results or ongoing reassurance. In some cases, you may feel let down by or even angry towards your family or friends for not understanding what you are going through, or for not helping in your efforts to find out what is wrong.

Work or study. Many people with health anxiety find it difficult to stop worrying about and checking for signs of illness. All this worrying can impact on your ability to concentrate and focus on the task at hand. Work or study time may also be taken up by medical appointments or internet searching leading to you falling behind in your work or study tasks.

Life enjoyment and satisfaction. Focussing on potential health problems can lead you to have a skewed negative outlook and may even lead to depressed mood. In some cases, you may become so focussed on your health concerns and seeking certainty about your health that you will stop doing things that you used to enjoy or that gave you a sense of achievement (e.g., exercise, socialising). This withdrawal leads to further depressed mood as you limit your opportunities for fun and success.

Relationships with health professionals. Repeated trips to the doctor without clear results can leave both you and your health provider feeling dissatisfied. You may even begin to feel frustrated or angry towards your health provider or towards the health system entirely! In some cases, you may have even had the experience of feeling like your health provider does not believe you or thinks you are a “hypochondriac”. In some cases, your doctor may have even said this too you!

Obviously, this is neither helpful for you or your health professional. We want our health providers to be on board with responding to our health needs. In turn, most health providers want to help us work out why we are feeling the way we do, and to help us reduce, eliminate or manage our health worries and problems.



Finances. Multiple or repeated medical tests or procedures, time spent away from work, and even travel costs to attend medical appointments can soon start to add up. For some people, the worry, checking and reassurance seeking behaviours associated with health anxiety can become so overwhelming or time-consuming that you are no longer able to work.

Unpleasant anxiety symptoms. As already discussed, each time you worry about your health you set off your fight/flight response. People experiencing health anxiety may therefore feel restless, physically tense, or unable to relax. They may also experience sleep disturbance, nausea, heart palpitations, chest pain or pressure, sweating, dizziness or light-headedness, tingling sensations, and feelings of detachment from part of or all of their body. Given you may already be worrying about your health, having more physiological symptoms can sometimes then gives you even more sensations to worry about!



If you are experiencing health anxiety, take a moment to write down how health anxiety is affecting you.

What You Can Expect From This Information Package

Whether you are experiencing excessive health worries alone, or in combination with unexplained or diagnosed health symptoms or conditions, this information package can help you begin to reduce your excessive worry and any unhelpful behaviours you may be engaging in.

We have begun with a discussion about what health anxiety is and what impact it can have on one's life. In the next two modules, we will explore and discuss how health anxiety develops and what keeps it going. The modules after these will focus on what you can do to overcome health anxiety.

The following are the modules that make up this information package:

- Module 1: Understanding Health Anxiety
- Module 2: How Health Anxiety Develops
- Module 3: What Keeps Health Anxiety Going?
- Module 4: Reducing Your Focus on Health Symptoms and Worries
- Module 5: Re-evaluating Unhelpful Health Related Thinking
- Module 6: Reducing Checking and Reassurance Seeking
- Module 7: Challenging Avoidance and Safety Behaviours
- Module 8: Adjusting Health Rules and Assumptions
- Module 9: Healthy Living and Self Management Planning

When using self-help materials, some people might skip sections or complete things in a different order. The modules in this information package have been designed to be completed in the order they appear. We recommend that you work through the modules in sequence, finishing each module before moving on to the next one in the series. We believe that by doing this, you will maximise the benefits you might receive from working through this information package.

We believe that this information package will be beneficial for anyone who would like to address any difficulties they might have with health anxiety. We encourage you to take this journey through all our modules, and hope that you will come away with a balanced view of your health and continue to engage in appropriate health seeking behaviours. You might find that it gets a little tough at times, but we encourage you to stay with it and keep on working through these modules until you reach the end. See you at the next module!



Module Summary

- To worry about your health is a normal human experience.
- Health anxiety refers to the excessive concern that there may be a threat to your health which triggers your anxiety (fight/flight) response.
- Health anxiety is problematic when it is excessive, out of proportion to the realistic chances of having a serious problem, persists despite negative tests and reassurance from health professionals, leads to excessive unhelpful behaviours such as body-checking and medical test-seeking, and causes you significant distress or impacts on your functioning.
- Health anxiety can exist in people who are “healthy”, in people who are experiencing real yet unexplained medical symptoms, and in people who have an existing and diagnosed medical condition. In health anxiety the issue is not whether your physical symptoms are real, but whether you are responding to and coping with your symptoms in a helpful or unhelpful way.
- Health anxiety can impact on your relationships with family and friends, and even with health professionals. It can also impact on your capacity to maintain work or study commitments, and affect your mood and finances.
- When you worry about your health, you trigger off your fight/flight response. This gives you more physiological symptoms which you may then also start to worry about.



Coming up next ...

In the next module, we will explore and learn more about how health anxiety develops.

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for health anxiety is based on the approach that health anxiety is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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