

## Helping Health Anxiety

### Module 4

# Reducing Your Focus on Health Symptoms and Worries

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## Introduction

In Modules 2 and 3, we discussed how focussing on our symptoms can have the negative consequence of increasing the intensity of the symptoms. This, in turn, can create more worry about the symptoms, which brings on more anxiety sensations, increasing our desire to focus on our symptoms even more! This Module will explore ways that you can start to decrease the amount of time spent focussed on health symptoms and worries, and thus start to break this vicious cycle.

## Focussing on Symptoms and Worries

People who experience health anxiety will often find themselves scanning their bodies for signs of ill health and then worrying about bodily sensations. To a certain extent, it is normal to be aware of bodily sensations and changes, and to pay some attention to potential health problems. However, if you are spending too much time focussing on your symptoms or you find it difficult to stop thinking about these symptoms, you may need to start working on retraining your attention.

Before we start to work on this, let's stop to think about what you tend to focus on when you are feeling anxious about your health. Take a moment to list those particular sensations or areas of your body that you tend to become increasingly aware of when you are worrying about your health. You may also wish to highlight or circle these on the diagram. If you are not bothered by particular sensations or body areas, but instead spend most of your time just worrying about illness or death in general, you can still list below the health concerns that preoccupy your attention.

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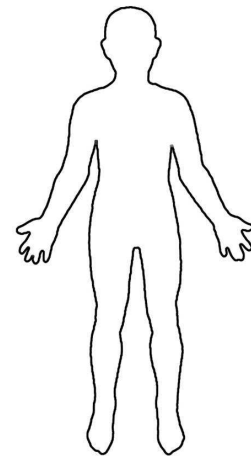
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Unfortunately, as we've mentioned, focussing on our symptoms can amplify the intensity of the symptoms, and thus bring on more worry and anxiety symptoms. Also, when we are focussed on our symptoms, it can take our attention away from everyday activities and even from important tasks. For example, have you ever found it hard to focus on a household chore, a work project, or even just reading these modules because your attention kept wandering back to a particular area of your body, back to health worries, or back to a particular bodily sensation?

Learning to retrain your attention is therefore an important step in overcoming your health anxiety. It will not only reduce the amount you focus on your sensations, but also free up your attention to focus on other activities and experiences.

## Overcoming Barriers to Attention Training

Before you start to work on retraining your attention, it can be important to examine whether you hold any positive beliefs about the benefits of continuing to focus on your health symptoms or worries.

Examples of such positive beliefs include:

“Focusing on my symptoms helps me evaluate how dangerous they really are”

“Focusing on my body means I will catch any problems before it is too late”

“Not focusing on symptoms is tempting fate”

“Worrying about my health gets me prepared for anything”

“Worrying helps me solve my health problems”

“If I keep worrying, I will prevent illness and disease”

It makes sense that if you hold such positive beliefs about focusing your attention on your health symptoms and worries that you will continue to do so. After all, you are telling yourself it is helpful and even protective!

If you hold any positive beliefs about focusing on your symptoms and worries, even to a small degree, we recommend that you first dissect and challenge those beliefs. Once you have evaluated whether your focussing on symptoms or worries is really helpful, you will then be in a better position to decide if you would like to change that behaviour. Below are a range of questions you can ask yourself to evaluate your positive beliefs about focusing on your symptoms and worries.

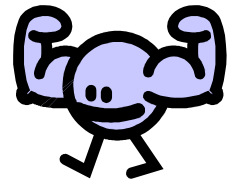
Positive belief to be evaluated: _____ How much do you believe this now (0% = not at all, 100% = completely): _____%
<b>What is the goal of focusing your attention in this way?</b> Does focusing your attention in this way truly reach your goal? How <i>exactly</i> does it help and protect you? If you were diagnosed with a health problem tomorrow, how has focusing on symptoms and worries truly prepared you?
<b>Are there any negative consequences to focusing your attention in this way?</b> Does it increase the intensity of the sensation? Are you setting off more fight/flight anxiety symptoms by worrying so much? Is it possible that by focusing on one symptom or worry you are missing another? How can you decide which symptom or worry to focus on?
<b>If a child was focusing on their symptoms and worries as much as you, would you encourage them to do it more? If not, why not?</b>
<b>What conclusions can you make from this?</b>
Re-rate the strength of your positive belief (0% = not at all, 100% = completely): _____%

## Attention Training

So, how do we let go of focussing on and worrying about our symptoms, and get our attention back to the here and now? Well, think of your attention like a muscle... if you don't exercise it regularly, it will become weak and won't work as well. We need to strengthen it by giving it regular exercise!!

There are two ways you can give your attention a regular workout. One of these involves practicing sustaining your attention while engaged in everyday tasks, and the other involves a more formal meditation practice.

It is important to remember while engaging in these workouts that it is completely normal for our minds to wander off to other things. This is what minds do. They drift off to memories, concerns, sensations, images, planning, and daydreams, to name a few. When you notice that your mind has wandered during these activities, be careful not to criticise yourself for this. After all, it is completely normal. Instead, think about each and every "wander" as another opportunity to practice your skills of bringing your attention back to the here and now. Think of it this way, the skill you are learning is not to have perfectly sustained attention, but instead to catch your attention as it wanders and bring it back. As such, it really doesn't matter how many times your attention wanders, as that is part of the training.



### Mundane task focussing

You may have noticed that when you are doing everyday household jobs like the dishes or the ironing, your mind is not really on the task at hand. These are often times that our mind starts to wander. Therefore, these types of tasks are great opportunities to practice strengthening our attention muscle.

With mundane task focussing, the goal is to gradually practice sustaining your attention on a mundane activity for longer and longer periods of time – thus giving your attention a good workout.

Take a moment to think about some everyday household activities that you engage in where your mind might wander frequently (e.g., doing the dishes, ironing, gardening, taking a shower, vacuuming, eating a meal). Write these below so that you can refer back to them when planning your attention workout.

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Pick one of these tasks for your first attention workout, and record the task and when and where you will do it on the *My Attention Workout Worksheet*. Now, start the task without intentionally trying to work your attention. You may wish to gauge your 'pre-workout' attention levels by rating the percentage of your attention that is currently focussed on your self (including on your own thoughts, and bothersome symptoms and sensations) versus the percentage currently focussed on the task at hand.

Now, whilst continuing the task, you can officially start your attention workout. Each time you notice your mind has wandered off the task, anchor your attention back to the task by focussing on the following:

- Touch: What does the activity feel like? What is the texture like (e.g., rough, smooth)? Where on your body do you have contact with it? Are there areas of your body with more or less contact with the task?
- Sight: What do you notice about the task? What catches your eye? How does the task appear? What about the light... the shadows... the contours... the colours?
- Hearing: What sounds do you notice? What kinds of noises are associated with the task?
- Smell: What smells do you notice? Do they change during the task? How many smells are there?
- Taste: What flavours do you notice? Do they change during the task? What is the quality of the flavours?

You don't actually have to write down the answers to these questions. Simply use them to help anchor your attention back to the task at hand. Once you have completed the mundane task focussing activity, you may wish to re-rate how much of your attention was self versus task focussed, and think about what you have learned from completing the activity.

## My Attention Workout

Mundane task for my attention workout: _____ Where and when will I do my workout: _____
<b>Before starting the attention workout, where do I notice my attention is focussed?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-focussed attention (including thoughts, bothersome symptoms/sensations): _____ %</li> <li>• Task-focussed attention (the task I was actually engaged with): _____ %</li> </ul> <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 5px;"> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 50px;"></span> 100 %         </div>
<b>During the attention workout, anchor my attention back to the task at hand by focussing on:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Touch: What does the activity feel like? What is the texture like (e.g., rough, smooth)? Where on my body do I have contact with the task? Are there areas of my body with more or less contact with the task?</li> <li>• Sight: What do I notice about the task? What catches my eye? How does the task appear? What about the light... the shadows... the contours... the colours?</li> <li>• Hearing: What sounds do I notice? What kinds of noises are associated with the task?</li> <li>• Smell: What smells do I notice? Do they change during the task? How many smells are there?</li> <li>• Taste: What flavours do I notice? Do they change during the task? What is the quality of the flavours?</li> </ul> <p>Remember that it is normal for my mind to wander off. Rather than beating myself up over this, use each time my mind wanders as an opportunity to workout my attention muscle again.</p>
<b>Having completed the attention workout, where did I notice my attention was focussed during the workout?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-focussed attention (including thoughts, bothersome symptoms/sensations): _____ %</li> <li>• Task-focussed attention (the task I was actually engaged with): _____ %</li> </ul> <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 5px;"> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; display: inline-block; width: 50px;"></span> 100 %         </div>
What did you learn from this? What conclusions can you make from this?



## Meditation training

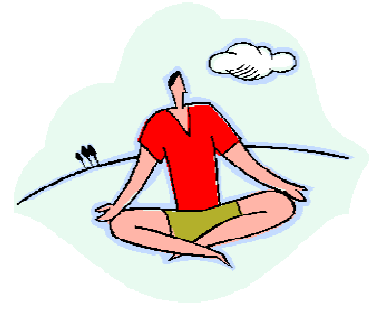
Using a meditation exercise is another way that you can obtain regular practice at being present focussed, dealing with a wandering mind, and disengaging from distressing thoughts and sensations.

Mindfulness is one type of meditation that can assist you to skilfully disengage from such thoughts and sensations. This approach involves practicing how to notice when your attention has wandered off, and then skilfully redirecting your attention back to the present, to the here and now.

It is not an attempt to control your thoughts or sensations or to make them go away. It is actually about allowing these thoughts and sensations to be present in your mind and body, but choosing to shift your attention back on to your breathing.

Mindfulness can be combined with a “letting go” activity, where you choose to notice but then let go of distressing thoughts, emotions or physical sensations.

It is important to remember that this is not a quick fix, it is not easy, and requires regular practice. By practicing daily you may eventually become better at letting go of your distressing thoughts and sensations in a more informal way as they pop up throughout the day.



## Meditation Steps

- 1) To begin the practice, sit down in a chair and adopt a relaxed and alert posture, then ask yourself, *what am I experiencing right now?* What thoughts are around, what feelings are around, and what body sensations? Allow yourself to just acknowledge, observe and describe these experiences to yourself, without judgment and without trying to change them or make them go away. Spend 30 seconds to 1 minute just doing this.
- 2) Now bring *your focus of awareness to your breath*, focusing on the sensations of your breath as it moves back and forth in your belly. Binding your awareness to the back and forth movements of the sensations in your belly from moment to moment, and letting all thoughts go. Maybe say to yourself ‘relax’ or ‘let go’ on each outward breath. If your mind wanders away to other thoughts, feelings and sensations – again do not try to change them or make them go away. Simply acknowledge their presence, allowing them to be there, then letting go with your attention and focusing back on your breath. Spend about 1 or 2 minutes doing this.
- 3) Now *expand your awareness to sensing your whole body breathing*, being aware of sensations throughout your body. If there are any strong feelings around, maybe saying to yourself “whatever it is, it is OK, just let me feel it.” Allowing yourself to breathe with these feelings, and if your mind wanders to bothersome thoughts or sensations, just acknowledge and let go of these - focusing back on sensing your whole body breathing. Continue doing this for about another 1 or 2 minutes.

As you start to get more familiar with this skill you can try increasing the time of steps 2 & 3. We would recommend that you keep increasing this until you are able to practice twice per day for ten minutes or more, and then try to keep practicing daily at this level.

Remember, your attention is like a muscle, if you stop the regular exercise your muscle won’t work quite so well. You can use the Attention Training Diary to keep track of your progress.

## Attention Training Diary

You can use this sheet to both plan your attention training and to record your progress along the way. The last column asks you to jot down any comments about the experience – What did you notice? Where did your mind wander off to? Were you able to notice this? Were you able to interrupt this? How did it compare to other times you have practiced?

Date & Time	Attention Task	Duration	Comments
<i>e.g., Monday 28<sup>th</sup>, 8:00am</i>	<i>Meditation</i>	<i>3 mins</i>	<i>This was quite hard as my mind kept wanting to jump ahead to thinking about work.</i>
<i>Monday 28<sup>th</sup>, 5:30pm</i>	<i>Mundane task focussing (while doing the dishes)</i>	<i>10 mins</i>	<i>I noticed lots of things I didn't usually notice, but I was still thinking a lot about my health. It was probably a little easier than the meditation as I had something to focus on.</i>

We recommend that you practice at least daily mundane task focussing workouts and twice daily meditation. If you find it difficult to fit the regular meditation exercises in, you could instead increase the number of mundane task focussing workouts you do per day. Remember, mundane task focussing isn't asking you to do anything extra, only to use those activities you are already doing in a particular way.

## Postponing Your Health Worries

Even though you have started to exercise your attention muscle to help overcome your tendency to over-focus on physical symptoms, you may notice that your attention keeps wandering back to worries about specific symptoms or sensations, or more general worries about your health. While it is completely normal for health worries to pop in to our minds, the more we focus on these worries the more anxiety symptoms we trigger in our bodies. This in turn gives us even more to worry about!

Many people with health anxiety will therefore try to stop their worrying by trying to distract themselves or telling themselves not to think about their health. Unfortunately, trying not to think about something can have the opposite effect by making us think about it even more! For example, try not to think of a pink elephant for the next 60 seconds and see how well you do.

So, if *focussing on our worries* creates more worries and symptoms, and *trying not to focus on our worries* actually increases the amount we worry, what should we do!?! Fortunately, there is third option we can use called **Worry Postponement**.

Postponing your health worries means that it is alright for an initial worrisome thought to pop in to your mind (e.g., “what if this chest pain is a heart attack”), and even to start focussing on those symptoms you are worried about. However, as soon as you notice this, you make a decision not to ‘chase’ the worries or symptoms any further at that particular time.

Not chasing the worrisome thought any further means that you don’t try to evaluate the symptoms or sensations any further, anticipate the worst or run scenarios and solutions related to the symptom through your head over and over again (e.g., “This could be cancer, I think the pain is getting worse? What will happen to me and my family if it is? I should see my doctor” etc). Instead, you postpone worrying about your health until a later time, using your attention skills to bring your attention back to the here and now, and back to the task at hand.



### How to postpone

#### 1. Set a worry period

- Nominate a set time, place and length of time to do all your worrying and focussing on symptoms
- Try and keep your worry period the same everyday (e.g., 6pm, dining room, 20mins). We recommend no more than 30 mins per day
- Try not to set your worry period before bed.

#### 2. Postpone

- When you notice yourself worrying or focussing on particular symptoms throughout the day, list your concerns on the *Postponing Health Worries Worksheet*, or even on a piece of paper or a notepad if the worksheet is not available to you. Note the worries down **briefly** (in a couple of words only e.g., “Noticed pain in my side, thought it could be appendicitis”)
- Decide to think about it later and save your thoughts for your worry period
- Use your attention skills to bring your attention back to the present and reassure yourself that you will deal with the worries and sensations during your worry period.

#### 3. When you get to your worry period

- Only think about the things you’ve listed if you feel you **must**
- You don’t have to worry about them if they no longer bother you, or if they no longer seem relevant to you
- If you do need to worry, only worry for the set amount of time specified
- If you run out of time during your worry period to cover all the things on your list, remind yourself that these items will be covered the following day during your next worry period.

We recommend that you practice this strategy over the next week by completing the *Postponing Health Worries Worksheet*. We then suggest that you then continue to use postponement as a strategy for as long as you continue to worry about your health.



## Postponing Health Worries Worksheet

### Set Your Worry Period

Start Time:	End Time:	Place:
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### Briefly record your health worries

Then use your attention strategies to bring your attention back to the present. Remind yourself that you will come back to these worries and sensations during your worry period.

Day	Worries (in a few words only)
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	
Sunday	

### After practicing this for a week, take a moment to review how you went with the postponement strategy

What happened to the worries you postponed? Did you still need to worry about them later?

If you were able to postpone, what happened to the symptoms you were worrying about?

If you had trouble postponing - Did you actually write down your worries (recommended) or just try to remember them (not recommended)? Do you need to work more on your attention training exercises?

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### When To Seek Medical Attention

Throughout this module we have been discussing ways to decrease our focus on and worry about bodily symptoms and sensations. However, we obviously don't want you to ignore symptoms that may indicate the real need for medical attention. So how do we know when to postpone our worries and when to act on them?

While there are no simple answers to this question, Patricia Furer and colleagues, experts in health anxiety from the University of Manitoba, recommend the following guidelines:

- Use those self-care remedies you are already familiar with for managing symptoms of cold and flu, headaches, or backaches (e.g., rest, medication, heat/cold packs)
- For many symptoms, such as pain or colds, try the “wait two weeks” approach. Many symptoms will disappear without medical assistance over this period of time. You can think of this as a prolonged postponement exercise, where rather than waiting until your worry period that night, you are putting off thinking about it for another two weeks. Obviously this will take quite a bit of practice with using the attention strategies!
- If symptoms persist beyond two weeks, then see your doctor
- Seek prompt medical attention if you have a high fever, intense pain, and signs of a worsening infection

We must also acknowledge that for people with particular diagnoses or who are taking particular medications, there may be other specific indicators that immediate medical intervention is needed. If you do have a diagnosis or are taking a medication, we would recommend that you speak with your doctor about developing your own guidelines for when to postpone your worries versus when to act on them immediately.



## Module Summary

- People who experience health anxiety will often find themselves scanning their bodies for signs of ill health and then worrying about bodily sensations
- Focussing on your symptoms can amplify the intensity of the symptoms, and thus bring on more worry and anxiety symptoms
- Learning to retrain your attention, so that you can decrease the amount of time you spend focussed on your symptoms and worries is therefore an important step in overcoming your health anxiety
- There are two ways you can retrain your attention. Mundane task focussing involves practicing sustaining your attention while engaged in everyday household tasks. Meditation involves a more formal daily practice of focussing your attention back onto your breathing each time your mind drifts off to different thoughts or sensations.
- Once you have started to strengthen your attention muscle, you can combine this with a postponement exercise to decrease the amount of time you spend worrying about and focussing on your health.
- While we have provided some guidelines, it is important to work with your doctor to develop your own set of guidelines as to when you should postpone your worries about symptoms, versus when you should seek medical assistance.



### Coming up next ...

In the next module, we will explore ways to address your unhelpful health related thoughts during your worry period.

## 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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