



## Helping Health Anxiety

### Module 8

# **Adjusting Health Rules and Assumptions**

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## Introduction

You have now learned strategies to decrease the amount of time spent worrying about and focussing on health symptoms, to directly challenge unhelpful health related thoughts, and to decrease unhelpful health related behaviours. We hope that you are finding these strategies helpful in improving how you think and feel about your health, and how you behave in relation to your health on a day-to-day basis. Now that you have some experience in working with strategies to manage your health anxiety, it is also important to tackle some of the more difficult underlying reasons that you started to worry about your health in the first place. In this module, we will discuss adjusting the underlying health rules and assumptions that gave rise to your health anxiety.

## Helpful vs Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

As we mentioned in Module 2, we all have rules and assumptions by which we live our lives. Although we aren't specifically taught "the rules", we learn them through our early experiences and from observing other people who influence us in our earlier years. You may not even be aware that you developed these rules or assumptions, but they consistently influence your thoughts and behaviour anyway.

As we've mentioned earlier, some rules and assumptions are helpful and some are not. We all need guidelines for living to help us make sense of the world and to cope with our everyday lives. So having rules, in itself, is not a bad thing.

Helpful rules and assumptions are realistic and somewhat flexible. An example of a healthy rule is, "drivers should stop at red lights". This is a helpful rule because there is evidence to suggest that not stopping at a red light may result in a car accident. So keeping this rule can help ensure our survival!

Helpful rules are also flexible and adaptable, and this helps us to adapt our behaviour to different situations. For example, having the rule that "it is good to try to eat healthy food" is helpful because there is evidence to support the fact that you will have fewer health problems if you eat healthy foods. But there is also flexibility in this rule so that it takes into account occasions when it may be preferable to eat foods that are less healthy without feeling guilty (e.g., birthdays or Christmas).

Unhelpful rules are those that are inflexible and unreasonable. For example, holding the belief "my doctor should be able to explain each of my bodily sensations and changes" is unreasonable in the sense that it is unlikely that your doctor will be able to maintain this standard every time you see them. It is not possible or reasonable to expect your doctor to know exactly what is happening within your body at all times. Therefore, this type of unhelpful rule will only keep you worried about your health, and dissatisfied or perhaps even frustrated with your doctor.



## Identifying My Unhelpful Health Rules & Assumptions

Let's now take some time to identify what unhelpful rules and assumptions you might have developed regarding your health. You might already have an idea of these from the work you have completed in Module 2. If you are unsure, there are several ways that you can start to identify these rules or assumptions.

Take a moment to record some responses to the following questions:

- How have people around me responded to health concerns in the past? What might I have learned from them?
- What standards do I expect myself to meet regarding my health?

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- What standards do I expect my doctor or other health professionals to meet?
- What symptoms do I allow myself to experience without worrying?
- What symptoms or sensations do I never allow myself to experience?
- What negative predictions do I repeatedly make about my health? (Note: you may want to review your thought diaries from Module 5 for any repeated themes)

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Health rules and assumptions can be in the form of statements such as:

“I must / should / have to always...”	e.g., “I must take all symptoms and bodily changes seriously”, “I must be symptom free to be healthy”
“My doctor must / should / has to always...”	e.g., “My doctor must be certain”, “My doctor should be able to explain each of my bodily sensations and changes”
“I must / should never...”	e.g., “I should never ignore a symptom”
“My doctor must / should never”	e.g., “My doctor should never discount a symptom until all possible tests have been conducted”
“If..., then...”	e.g., “If my doctor doesn’t know exactly what the problem is, then it must be really serious”, “If I don’t persist, then my doctor could miss something important”

Now that you have read this section on identifying your health rules and assumptions, have you been able to identify any that are operating in your life? What are some of those health rules and assumptions? Take a few moments to write them down.

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## Adjusting Health Rules and Assumptions

By now, you might have been able to identify those health rules and assumptions that have been guiding your everyday health-related thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Just as in the previous modules, you can work at challenging your health rules and assumptions by asking yourself specific questions, and using one of our worksheets to guide you through this step-by-step. If you have worked through the previous modules, you will probably find that changing these rules and assumptions will be a little easier. After all, you will have already tackled those health-related thoughts, feelings and behaviours that have been fuelling your health rules and assumptions day-to-day.

The goal of completing the *Adjusting My Health Rules & Assumptions Worksheet* is not to get rid of your health rules or assumptions, but rather to adjust them into more realistic and flexible health guidelines. Before completing the worksheet, read through the following steps:

### 1. Identify the health rule or assumption you would like to adjust

You may have a number of rules or assumptions that you would like to work on. There is no right or wrong place to start with this. Some people like to tackle the one that is impacting on them the most. Others like to start on the rule or assumption they think will be easiest to challenge, so that they can build up some confidence. Either of these strategies is fine.

### 2. Ask yourself “Where might this rule / assumption have come from? Why is it still here?”

The purpose of the first question is to think about why you developed this rule or assumption. As mentioned before, these rules and assumptions have often developed as a way to protect ourselves and to make ourselves feel less vulnerable. It is therefore quite possible that the rules or assumptions made sense at the time you developed them. The purpose of the second question is to examine why you are still holding on to these rules or assumptions. Ask yourself, “What advantages are there to living by this rule or assumption? What benefits do I obtain? What do these rules or assumptions protect me from now?”

### 3. Ask yourself “What impact does this rule / assumption have on my life?”

Take a moment to record how holding this rule or assumption has affected your thinking, feelings, and behaviours. How has it impacted on your relationships with others, including with health professionals? How has it impacted on your ability to do things that you value, and that give you a sense of enjoyment or satisfaction?



### 4. Ask yourself “In what ways is this rule / assumption unreasonable, unrealistic or unhelpful?”

- Is your rule actually achievable? (E.g., if you believe “I must be symptom free to be healthy” – can you actually ever be symptom free?)
- Can you or your doctor really live up to this standard? Is it possible that your doctor is holding a different set of rules or assumptions to yourself? (E.g., if you believe “my doctor should be able to explain each of my bodily sensations and changes” – does the doctor know your rules/assumptions? Does your doctor hold the same rules or assumptions? If not, what rules or assumptions might they be operating under? Can doctors always explain everything?)
- Do the disadvantages of this rule / assumption outweigh the advantages? If there are more advantages than disadvantages, then maybe you don’t need to challenge this rule / assumption. If however you decide that the rule / assumption is unhelpful, then let’s move on to the next step

### 5. Now, think carefully about what might be a more balanced and flexible rule or assumption.

Consider using less extreme terms than “musts” and “shoulds”, such as “sometimes”, “I’d prefer it if...”, “I would like...”, “It would be nice if...”. For example, instead of the unhelpful rule “I should never ignore a symptom”, consider the alternative “I will sometimes need to pay attention to symptoms,

such as pain, fever and signs of infection. However most symptoms will improve over time and it is pretty normal to experience various sensations, including aches and pains.”

You may also consider changing the ending of any “If... then...” statements to a less worrisome conclusion. For example, instead of the unhelpful assumption “If my doctor doesn’t know exactly what the problem is, then it must be really serious”, consider the alternative “If my doctor doesn’t know exactly what the problem is, then maybe it is nothing to worry about”.

Balanced rules and assumptions might end up being more lengthy in their wording than your old rules and assumptions. This is because they are more sophisticated – you are making it realistic, flexible and adaptable. If you find it difficult to think of an alternative rule or assumption that is more balanced, don’t worry. Continue with the strategies you have learned in the previous Modules to address your day-to-day health related thoughts, feelings and behaviours. By doing this, more balanced rules and assumptions may become apparent to you over time.

### **6. Finally, ask yourself “What can I do to put this rule / assumption into practice on a daily basis?”**

Why do you think it might be important to do this? Remember that your old rule or assumption may have been in operation for some time, and has guided how you behave in relation to your health. So it is important that you not only have a new rule, but new behaviours to accompany this rule so that the new rule can be “house-broken” and become part of your new way of operating.

On the next page is an example of how an *Adjusting My Health Rules & Assumptions Worksheet* can be completed. On the page after that, there is a blank worksheet. After you have a chance to look at the example, try working through a worksheet yourself to adjust one of your unhelpful health rules or assumptions.



## Adjusting My Health Rules & Assumptions

(Example)

<p><b>Rule or assumption I would like to adjust</b></p> <p><i>I must be symptom free to be healthy</i></p>
<p><b>Where might this rule / assumption have come from? Why is it still here?</b></p> <p><i>My family have always worried about their health. My mother took us to the doctor for antibiotics even if we had just the slightest cold. If we told her about any aches or pains, she would get really concerned and worried. I guess that even now I am still worried that if I drop this standard, I am exposing myself to illness</i></p>
<p><b>What impact does this rule / assumption have on my life?</b></p> <p><i>I'm always thinking and worrying about sensations in my body I feel the need to go to the doctor every time I notice something weird or new in my body I don't like to feel tired, so I don't do much. I miss out on lots of fun things my friends do. I find it hard to concentrate at work, especially if there is something going on in my body</i></p>
<p><b>In what ways is this rule / assumption unreasonable, unrealistic or unhelpful?</b></p> <p><i>When I say to myself, "I must be symptom free to be healthy" I am setting a pretty unachievable standard. It is impossible to be symptom free and it is normal to feel some aches and pains from time to time. Even some "healthy" people will have aches and pains occasionally.</i></p>
<p><b>What is an alternative rule / assumption that is more balanced and flexible?</b></p> <p><i>I would prefer not to feel any discomfort or strange sensations in my body, but it is unlikely that I will always be symptom free. It is probably more helpful if I think about trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle than worrying about all the different symptoms and sensations in my body.</i></p>
<p><b>What can I do to put this rule / assumption into practice on a daily basis?</b></p> <p><i>I will start doing more things with my friends and letting myself feel tired occasionally I will ensure I buy fresh fruit and vegetables each week to improve my diet I will use my attention strategies and postponement to keep getting on with life, even if I feel some strange sensations in my body</i></p>

## Adjusting My Health Rules & Assumptions

<p><b>Rule or assumption I would like to adjust</b></p>
<p><b>Where might this rule / assumption have come from? Why is it still here?</b></p>
<p><b>What impact does this rule / assumption have on my life?</b></p>
<p><b>In what ways is this rule / assumption unreasonable, unrealistic or unhelpful?</b></p>
<p><b>What is an alternative rule / assumption that is more balanced and flexible?</b></p>
<p><b>What can I do to put this rule / assumption into practice on a daily basis?</b></p>

### Following Through

Now that you have worked through the worksheet, be sure to keep a copy of this new rule or assumption somewhere easily accessible. After all, those old health rules are likely to pop up from time to time, as they can take a while to wear out. Until your new rule or assumption becomes ‘worn in’, you may need to keep reminding yourself of it.

Importantly, keep putting your new rule into practice by carrying out those daily actions you have planned. Although it might seem difficult to you now, it will get easier as you keep doing them, and eventually it will become the new way of living your life.

Remember that the goal is not to rid yourself of helpful health rules (e.g., “if I have worsening pain, I should see a doctor”), but rather to adjust those unrealistic, unhelpful and outdated rules.





## Module Summary

- We all have rules and assumptions by which we live our lives. Although we may not be aware of them they consistently influence our thoughts and behaviours.
- Helpful rules are those that are realistic and somewhat flexible. They are designed to help us function and to keep us safe.
- Unhelpful rules are those that are inflexible and unreasonable.
- Although we may develop health rules and assumptions to try to protect ourselves, if they are inflexible or unreasonable they can keep our health anxiety going.
- To adjust any health rules or assumptions you have identified, you can:
  - Consider where the rules or assumptions came from and why they might still be here
  - Identify the current impacts of the rule or assumption
  - Consider the ways that the rule or assumption might be unreasonable, unrealistic or unhelpful
  - Develop a new balanced and flexible rule or assumption
  - Think of new ways of behaving that would put the new rule or assumption into practice



### Coming up next ...

In the next module, we will develop a healthy living self-management plan for you to keep everything going that you have learnt throughout these modules.

## 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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