


Cambridgeshire and Peterborough 

Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust

A Cambridge University Teaching Trust

Coping with Health Anxiety

Primary Care Psychological Treatment Service
Cambridge & Peterborough Mental Health Trust (Cambridge)

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ABOUT HEALTH ANXIETY

Most people worry about their health at some time. Usually people worry when they experience physical symptoms, and most of the time, these worries go away. For some people, though, the worries do not go away. These people worry that they may have a serious medical condition. These worries may affect their lives in very significant ways, leading to intense anxiety, panic attacks, feeling as though they cannot cope, or sometimes even depression.

This booklet focuses on how health worries come about and what keeps them going. It provides specific guidelines about what you can do to help decrease the anxiety associated with your health and begin to take control over your thoughts and behaviour related to your health.

1.1 WHAT IS HEALTH ANXIETY?

Health anxiety – as one would expect – involves intense anxiety about one’s health, usually to the point that it produces significant distress or interferes with one’s day-to-day functioning. Health anxiety involves either the **fear that one has a serious physical illness** or the **belief that one has a serious physical illness**.

People who experience health anxiety usually experience several of the symptoms and exhibit many of the behaviours listed below:

- **Physical symptoms.** There is a great deal of variety in the kinds of physical symptoms experienced, but some of the most common include chest pain, general aches and pains, sweating, trembling, headaches, numbness, and tingling. For some people, the physical symptoms may take the form of a noticed bodily change – for example, a lump or a bump.
- **Interpretation of body sensations as indicating severe illness.** This is the most important aspect of health anxiety – the physical symptoms that are experienced (e.g., chest pain, lump or bump) are either feared or believed to be an indication of a very serious medical problem.
- **Physiological arousal.** Due to the increased anxiety and the perception of threat, the body becomes more aroused, producing physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g., increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, gastrointestinal disturbance, and so on).
- **Checking behaviours and increased focus on the body.** People with health anxiety very often actively check their body for signs of illness. Focusing on the physical symptom(s) and monitoring the body for any physical changes are common.
- **Reassurance-seeking from doctors.** Motivated by their concern that their health is seriously in danger, people with health anxiety often seek medical consultations and examinations in hopes of easing their fears. Medical appointments may be

made with increasing frequency, and the opinions of multiple doctors may be sought.

- **Reassurance-seeking from family and friends.** People with health anxiety will often mention their symptoms to their family and friends and ask for opinions about whether they are really all right.
- **Spending a lot of time finding out about illness.** Some people are so concerned about the possibility of illness that they read a lot about illnesses and check out their symptoms, for example in a medical encyclopaedia, or in magazine articles, or on the internet.
- **Avoiding things to do with illness.** Quite frequently, people with health anxiety will stop watching programmes on TV that might mention their feared illness, or stop reading newspapers or magazines, or even stop talking about the illness they are worried about.
- **Other avoidant behaviours.** Many people stop engaging in activities that they fear may put their health at further risk. Behaviours such as walking, sports, and other forms of exercises are avoided. Other people may go to bed or sit down whenever they notice a physical symptom.

To give you a better idea of what health anxiety is all about, here is a case example:

Mary is a 36-year-old woman who works full-time as physiotherapist. She gave up smoking ten years ago. Over the past six months, she has become increasingly concerned that she may have lung cancer. The onset of her anxiety about her physical health seemed to coincide with an increase of stress at work as her patient load was growing quite large.

Mary noticed that she was getting pains in her chest. Other times she noticed that it was becoming more difficult to breathe easily. She went to her GP, who told her not to worry. When her symptoms did not improve, she returned to her GP, who did some tests. When the results of the tests came back, her GP told her that she was fine. She felt better for a few weeks, but then the pains and the breathing difficulties returned. This worried Mary more, and she started to read about the symptoms of lung cancer on the internet. She found that this increased her anxiety significantly, and that she could not stop thinking about her chest pain and breathing difficulties, and spent a significant amount of time worrying that she had cancer. She began to avoid reading about cancer in magazines, and would turn off the television if she suspected that cancer might be discussed on a programme she was watching.

Mary returned to the doctor several times; this seemed to provide some immediate relief, but the doubts would start to creep back a few days after the visits. She began to ask her husband whether he thought she had lung cancer. She kept a very close eye on her symptoms. She would sit or lie down whenever she noticed chest pain or breathing difficulties. She stopped exercising, and went out less and less. Her level of distress increased as her worries about her health continued to plague her.

Mary had several of the above symptoms.

- She had physical symptoms (chest pain, difficulty breathing) and worried a lot about them.
- She feared that her physical symptoms were an indication that she had a serious medical problem – lung cancer.
- She focused on her physical symptoms and monitored them.
- She sought reassurance from her GP and from her husband.
- At first, she looked for information about lung cancer on the internet, but when she discovered that this increased her anxiety, she started to avoid anything to do with cancer at all.
- She stopped engaging in activities that she thought might risk her health or aggravate her symptoms, and would sit or lie down every time she noticed the physical symptoms.

Look again at the list of features of health anxiety. Put a tick beside any of the symptoms you have experienced or behaviours that you engage in.

1.2 PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS: ARE THEY REAL?

Physical sensations are very real. However, they may arise from a number of different causes. One cause is illness. Other causes include normal changes in the body, stress, and worry.

The human body undergoes lots of physical changes every day. Most people experience aches and pains and unusual sensations at some point; these changes are sometimes noticed, and sometimes not. When they are noticed, some people attribute the change to the game of golf they played yesterday, or what they ate for lunch. Or they brush it off as a normal change in their body that will probably disappear in the near future. Sometimes physical changes and sensations that are experienced are due to the effects of a relatively minor health problem, like a cold or the flu - when people recognise this, they usually do not worry that these symptoms are a sign of serious illness. However, some people interpret the physical changes or sensations they experience as indicative of a serious health problem – this leads them to focus on the symptom and to start to worry a lot about it.

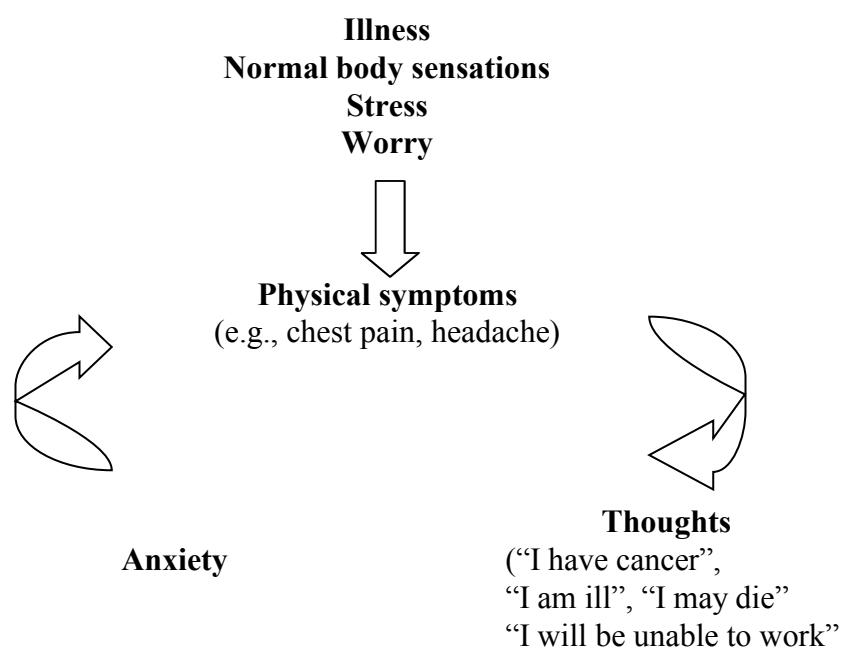
When someone has been stressed or worried, they may experience symptoms that are a direct result of the stress and worry. Some of the physical symptoms that are caused by anxiety, stress, and worry are listed below:

Symptoms of Anxiety

Heart rate increases (feels like the heart is pounding)
 Heart palpitations (feels like the heart “skips a beat” or “flutters”)
 Chest pain
 Breathlessness
 Perspiration (increased sweating, sweaty palms)
 Dryness of the mouth
 Dizziness
 Tingling sensations
 Aches and pains
 Tiredness
 Legs feel shaky, weak
 Trembling
 Digestive disturbance
 Headaches

If we think back to Mary’s example, she experienced chest pain and difficulty breathing. These symptoms may have been the product of anxiety, but they were **interpreted** as signs of a serious illness (e.g., cancer) and Mary’s thoughts were something like “I am very ill”. These thoughts led to more anxiety, which caused more physical symptoms....and so on, in a vicious circle.

Here is a diagram of “The Vicious Circle of Health Anxiety”:





*Physical symptoms are very real. They may be caused by illness, or by a normal bodily change, or by stress or worry. The symptoms caused by stress and worry are just as real as those caused by illness. They are not in your head! However, the way you **interpret** the physical symptoms can become a major problem and may serve to **aggravate** the symptoms you are experiencing.*

1.3 WHAT KEEPS HEALTH ANXIETY GOING?

Many of the things that people do to cope with health anxiety actually serve to keep the anxiety going. Think back to the list of symptoms and behaviours associated with health anxiety. Many of the behaviours listed there are really things that people who worry excessively about their health do in an effort to cope with their anxiety. But do these strategies work? Many, if not all, of these strategies are helpful in the short-term - that's why people do them. Unfortunately, they actually *serve to keep the problem going*.

Checking behaviours and increased focus on the body. Constant monitoring and checking of physical symptoms may seem like a good idea - that way, you notice even the slightest twinge, and you will notice a small change in the severity or intensity of a physical sensation. While it is wise to be aware of how you are doing physically, it is actually not helpful to pay close attention to your body at all times. This is because your body naturally fluctuates during the day and the night, and over time. Thus, noticing every little change provides very little useful information. And worse - any change that is noticed is worried about, and as worry increases, physical changes and symptoms tend to get worse, and as this happens, checking and monitoring increases even more. In other words, checking and monitoring your body feeds into the vicious circle of health anxiety.

The more you think about something, the more you notice it. Think about buying a new car. You decide on a make and a model. You may suddenly find that you notice that kind of car everywhere. Has the number of that kind of car increased? Probably not - you are now noticing these cars because you are thinking about them so often. The same thing can happen with physical symptoms - the more you think about them, the more you notice them, even though they have been there all along.

Another problem that some people run into is that they engage in more than a just “mental scan” of their body - in addition, they may poke and prod themselves to check for changes, or do things like swallow repeatedly to assess the severity of throat pain. These kinds of behaviours can also make the health anxiety worse by aggravating the symptom that is worried about. For example, imagine repeatedly touching and pressing on one spot on your arm. After a while, your arm would start to hurt - even if

it didn't hurt in the first place. Keep touching and prodding, and the skin may turn red and it may feel swollen. In this case, you would have produced the symptom that you feared!

Reassurance-seeking. People with health anxiety are likely to seek reassurance about their health from doctors, and they sometimes even check with their family and friends. In most cases, these people are told that nothing is wrong. This quickly makes them feel better. But...it doesn't take long until the anxiety returns. The reassurance doesn't last. What happens in the long term? Reassurance tends to encourage preoccupation with health. For example: You think about and notice symptoms, they worry you, so you visit your GP. He or she tells you nothing is wrong, so you feel better. But it isn't long before you notice more symptoms, and the worry returns. What happened to the original reassurance? It seems to have lost its punch...so you go back to the doctor. And the vicious circle continues. No amount of reassurance seems to be enough.

A question for you to think about: *How much reassurance would it take to make you stop worrying about your health forever?*

It may be difficult to come up with a precise answer. This is because seeking reassurance is a strategy that doesn't work well in the long term – no amount of reassurance is enough to convince you in any lasting way that nothing is wrong.

Spending a lot of time finding out about illness. Some people with health anxiety read a lot about their feared illness (or illness in general) and check out their symptoms, for example in a medical book, on the internet, or in magazines. This kind of behaviour can be a problem for several reasons. First - it is another example of paying too much attention to your health. Sooner or later you will find reference to a symptom that you have - a symptom that is not due to you being ill, but due to a normal body change or sensation, or a symptom that is produced by anxiety. The more attention you pay to that symptom, the more you worry...and so on. In addition, reading about illness can cause you to focus even more on your body, and notice even more sensations. A second problem is that sometimes people read up on illnesses as a way of seeking reassurance that they are not ill. And as we discussed above, the benefits of reassurance are short-lived and tend to keep the anxiety going.

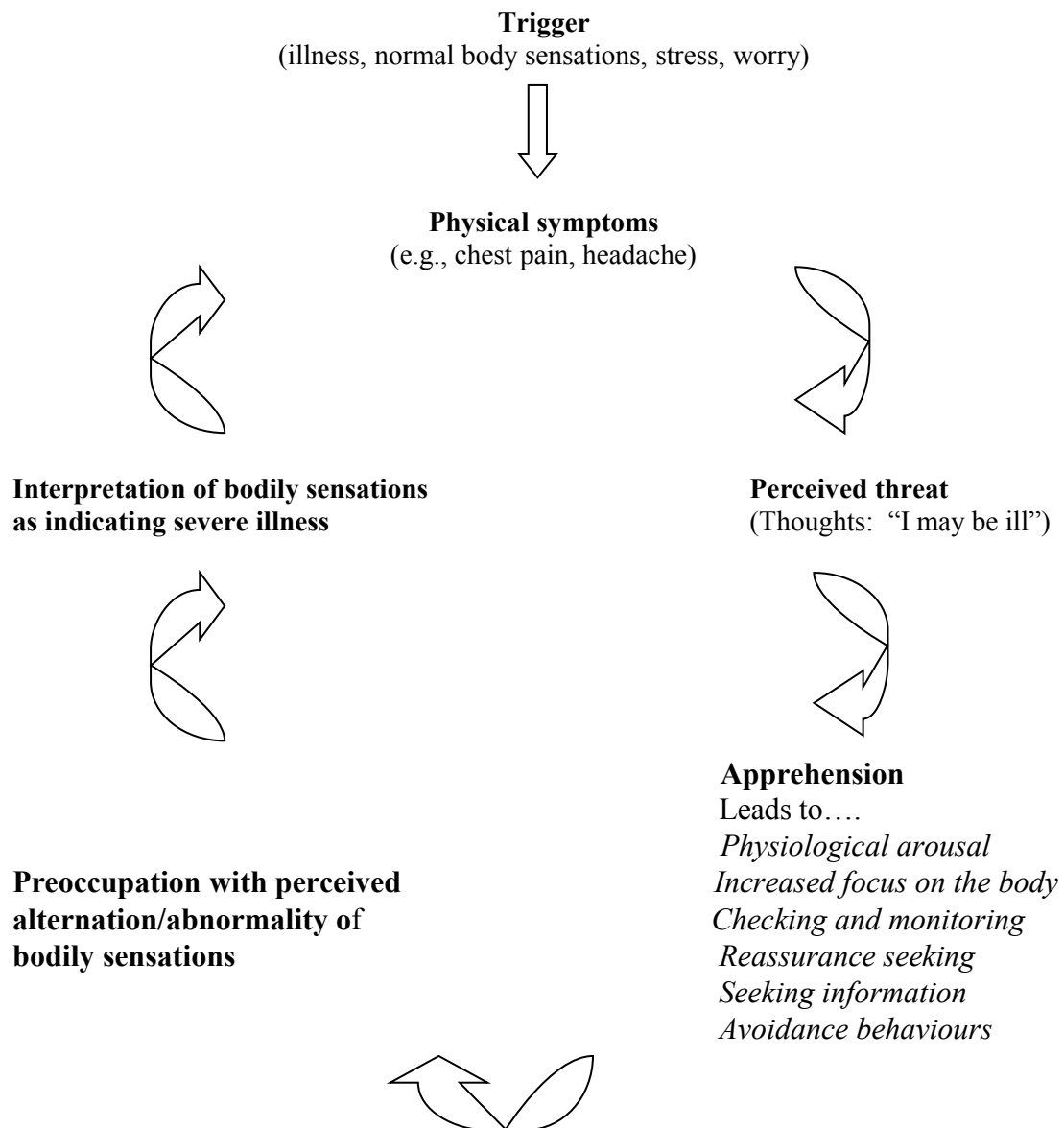
Avoiding things to do with illness. Avoiding information about illness can also be a problem. Some people stop watching programmes on TV, or reading articles in magazines or newspapers, about the illness they fear most. This can have the immediate effect of stopping their worries. But what happens in the long term? The worries persist. This is because they do not face what worries them and get the worries into proportion.

Other avoidant behaviours. Some people avoid physical activities to protect themselves from illness. Other people will go lie down every time they notice a symptom. Not only does this kind of avoidant behaviour make your life less enjoyable and interesting, but it contributes to you becoming less physically fit. As your fitness declines, you become more likely to tire quickly from any sort of exercise, and may tend to lose your breath more easily. This may end up confirming your

worries about your health, and lead to you reducing your activities further. This is another example of a strategy to cope with health anxiety making the situation even worse.

In summary: The strategies that you use to cope with anxiety about your health may actually be making your anxiety worse and keeping the problem going. You started using these strategies for a reason: they work in the *short-term*. But what about the long-term?

Here is a model of the vicious circle of health anxiety that takes into account these factors:



This model helps illustrate that your preoccupation and anxiety about your health is aggravated by some of the things that you may be doing to cope (like reassurance seeking and checking/monitoring your symptoms). Increasing your anxiety level can increase your physical symptoms, which further convince you that you are seriously ill...and the cycle continues.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO DECREASE HEALTH ANXIETY?

First and foremost, it is a good idea to think about what it is that you want to change. One very important thing to remember is that ***the aim of helping you cope with your health anxiety is NOT to make the symptoms disappear.*** Remember that changes in your body and a wide range of physical symptoms are perfectly normal. In addition, anxiety produces a host of physical symptoms that can be misinterpreted as an indication of serious illness. You cannot avoid the fact that it is natural for your body to undergo changes and for you to experience physical sensations, nor can you completely eliminate anxiety from your life – as such, you will never be free of symptoms. What is the aim, then? ***It is to help you become less WORRIED about your health.*** All kinds of symptoms may make you worry - and worrying may produce lots of symptoms. If you can reduce the amount of worrying that you do, you will very likely start to feel much better.

2.1 LIST THE WAYS YOU HAVE TRIED TO HELP YOURSELF AND HOW EFFECTIVE THESE METHODS HAVE BEEN.



You have probably used many strategies in an effort to ease your anxiety about your health. Make a list of things you have done to try and help yourself. After you have made the list, think about how helpful what you have done was in terms of 1)

reducing your anxiety at the time, and 2) reducing your anxiety in the long-term. Give each a rating between 0 and 10 for how effective the strategy was at the time, and in the long-term (0 is not at all effective, and 10 is very effective.)

Here is a list using Mary's example:

Ways I have tackled my worry that there is something wrong	How effective was this strategy at the time?	How helpful was this strategy in the long term?
Going to the doctor	10	0
Having tests	10	0
Talking about the symptoms with my husband	6	2
Looking up symptoms on the internet	3	0
Avoiding TV programmes and magazine articles about cancer	8	3
Avoiding exercise	8	2

Notice that most of the things Mary had done to try to help herself made her less worried in the short term, but in the long term they didn't seem to work at all. These strategies did not really help her address her persistent worry about her symptoms.

Your list:

Ways I have tackled my worry that there is something wrong	How effective was this strategy at the time?	How helpful was this strategy in the long term?

2.2 STOP TRYING TO PROVE THAT THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH YOU

Look again at the list and rankings you just made. Your efforts at proving there is nothing wrong really aren't working for you in the long term, are they? In fact, these strategies actually help keep the problem going.

No one can say with absolute certainty that nothing is wrong with you. Your doctor can tell you that you are definitely ill - medical exams and laboratory tests can prove this. But can any doctor or any laboratory test avoid ever making a mistake? Unlikely. Can they guarantee that you will never become ill? No. We all have some chance of developing illness at some point in our lives. But the chance of this may be much less than we think.

The question you must ask yourself is:

Do you want to spend your time worrying about the possibility of illness, or do you want to get on with your life?

There will always be uncertainty about your health. But just because something might happen, does not mean that it will.



Take a pen or pencil and write down your answers to these questions:

What are your worries about your health? (For example: “I am worried that I have cancer” or “I am worried that I will get heart disease and then be unable to take care of my family”)

Do you know for certain that you have this illness? (Being certain means that your doctor has told you so.)

Yes _____

No _____

If your answer is Yes: follow your doctor's advice. If you want, keep reading – some of the strategies here may still help you.

If your answer is No: (if you are uncertain or know that the answer is no) then move on to the next question.

Is there anything I can do about my worry - for example, change my diet or lifestyle?

Yes _____

No _____

If your answer is Yes: then start now. Move on to the next step.

If your answer is No: it's time to work on reducing your worrying. Move on to the next step.

2.3 DEALING WITH WORRIES ABOUT YOUR HEALTH

A very important first step is to start thinking about other possible explanations for your physical symptoms. Is it possible that these symptoms are a sign of something other than illness? Remember – rather than there being something seriously wrong with your health, the problem very well may be that you are very worried that something is wrong. The worry in itself may be causing you a lot of problems. So - a useful strategy may be to move the focus away from worrying about whether or not you have a disease and toward the worry.

The symptoms you have may be a sign that you have a serious illness. More likely is that they are not. Many symptoms can be caused by changes in your body that are normal, not dangerous. Being worried and anxious can cause you to feel quite ill, and cause you to experience lots of physical symptoms.



Try this exercise.

Write down all the evidence that indicates that you are seriously ill. Then ask yourself whether the symptoms could be caused by something else (like worry or anxiety). Write down all the other possible explanations of your symptoms. When you are done, think about which explanation you think is the most likely. Give a percentage rating of how like you think each explanation is.

Mary's example:

Evidence that I am seriously ill.	Evidence that I am not seriously ill.
I have chest pain.	I'm very stressed at the moment - maybe this is causing the chest pain.

(10%)	<p>The chest pain goes away if I lie down or focus on breathing deeply - lung cancer pain wouldn't go away so easily.</p> <p>Just because cancer was on the news tonight does not make it any more likely that I have cancer.</p>
	(90%)

There is a chart for you to record your evidence at the back of this booklet.

What exactly are your worries about your health? Worries about health anxiety tend to have certain characteristics.

- Worrying thoughts tend to **overestimate** the likelihood of danger
- Worrying thoughts tend to **overestimate** the severity of any possible problem
- Worrying thoughts tend to **underestimate** our ability to cope with the problem

For example, Mary might worry that she was very likely to get cancer (in fact, in her mind, it might be a certainty), that her symptoms were a sure indication that she did have cancer, that if she did get cancer, it would be the very worst and most incurable form of cancer, and that the cancer would incapacitate her and she would lead a lingering and painful death and be unable to take care of herself, both emotionally and physically. Not surprisingly, extreme thoughts such as these cause more anxiety - which can cause more symptoms - which makes the anxiety even worse and more out of proportion.



You have had some practice looking at evidence for and against you having a serious illness. Now you may want to try to challenge some of your thoughts about illness.

Follow these steps in completing a “thought chart”.

1. Write down exactly what your worrying thoughts are.
2. Rate (on a scale of 0-100) how much these thoughts worry you.
3. Go through evidence for and evidence against each thought, and then come up with an alternate thought that is more realistic.

Some questions to ask yourself:

Am I overestimating the risk here?
 Could my symptoms be related to something else besides illness?
 Am I underestimating my ability to cope?
 What would I say to myself if I was not so worried?
 What would you tell a friend if they had this worry?
 What would a friend tell you about this worry?

Have a look at Mary's thought chart:

Worrying thought	How worried was I? (0-100)	Alternate, more rational, thought	New rating of worry (0-100)
My chest pain means that I have lung cancer.	100	My chest pain is probably due to anxiety, not lung cancer. I'm more aware of it right now because I saw a bit of a TV programme on cancer.	30

There is a thought chart for you to complete at the back of this booklet. It is a very good idea to keep a diary of your worrying thoughts and your alternative thoughts. You should bring the diary with you wherever you go, and practice challenging your worrisome thoughts as often as you can.



Need some proof that your physical symptoms may be due to something other than a serious illness?

Here are some strategies:

1. Give a physical symptom that is bothering you a severity rating from 0-100.
2. Spend five minutes focusing on nothing but the physical symptom that is concerning you. Keep all your attention on the symptom.
3. At the end of five minutes, record what happened to the symptom. Did it get worse? Better? Give it a rating from 0-100.
4. Spend five minutes doing something else completely different. For example, try taking out a piece of paper and writing down, in detail, what the room you are sitting in looks like.
5. At the end of five minutes, record what happened to the symptom. Did it get worse? Better? Give it a rating from 0-100.
6. Compare the ratings. What happened when you were concentrating on your symptom compared to when you concentrated on something else?

Many people find that their symptoms increase in severity and/or that they notice the symptoms more when they are focusing on them. When they turn their attention to something else, they stop noticing the symptom or it seems to feel less intense. What does this tell you about focusing on your body sensations?

2.4 STOP ASKING FOR REASSURANCE

We all need reassurance about our health sometimes. When people feel ill or notice unusual changes in their body, it is appropriate to seek advice from a doctor or to mention the symptoms to a friend or family member. Having a doctor tell you that there is nothing to worry about, or talking over worries with friends and family can be very reassuring. However, too much reassurance means:

- **You become preoccupied with your health.**
- **You no longer believe the reassurance, and as a result, you need more and more reassurance to reduce your worry.**
- **You look to others to reassure you, when it is more helpful to reassure yourself.**

In the long run, reassurance does not work for people with health anxiety. Most of the time, it makes things even worse.

How do you stop? First of all, when you feel worried about your health, try not to ask for help from anyone else. You might even want to talk to your friends and family about this decision before you take action – let them know that if you do ask for reassurance, they should help you by not “reassuring” you. Perhaps you could ask them to change the subject if you ask, or remind you that you made an agreement that they would not answer you. This may make you feel more anxious in the short-term, so it may be important to plan for another way to deal with your worrying thoughts. A good idea for distraction is to do something else: go for a walk, clean the house, or read a book. Find something that works for you – something that you can easily do when you are tempted to talk about your health.



It is a good idea to keep a record of how often you ask for reassurance or talk about your health. If you are not given reassurance, you will discover that you gradually stop asking for it less often, and start to feel less worried.

	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
Number of times I ask for reassurance							
How worried I felt (0-100)							

Keep a diary like this for several weeks, and review what happens to your level of worry as you refrain from asking for reassurance.

2.5 STOP MONITORING AND CHECKING YOUR SYMPTOMS

Monitoring and checking your bodily state is sensible, as long as it is not done in excess. For example, doing monthly (not daily!) checks for lumps in breasts is a procedure recommended by doctors. It is not helpful to pay attention to your health **at all times**. You have seen how worrying about your health can make you aware of even the smallest change in your body and make you notice every sensation. It is also not reasonable to check every lump and bump on your body multiple times a day – remember, poking, touching, or squeezing a lump can make it swollen and sore, and chances are that this will make you even more worried!



How to stop monitoring and checking your symptoms:

1. Decide how much checking is reasonable. Ask your doctor for some advice, or check with friends or family to see how often they check or monitor their bodies.
2. When you are tempted to check – DON'T! Not checking and monitoring your body will probably make you more worried in the short-term. This is a good time to use your distraction strategies, to help take your mind off your worry.
4. Checking may be like a bad habit for you. If so, you may need some practice at stopping. You may want to ask your family or friends for help – perhaps they can remind you if they see you checking your symptom, or maybe that help distract you when you find yourself starting to worry.

Tips for Distracting Yourself

- Do something else. Physical activity may be helpful – try going for a walk or a swim, or do some gardening or cooking. Whatever you like to do! Reading a book or listening to the radio may also be helpful.
- Pay attention to something else. Notice what is around you, either in the room or outside. Describe the picture in great detail, or try something like counting how many green things that you see. The more detailed the task, the more distracting it will be.
- Do a mental exercise. Mental arithmetic works for some people – try counting backwards from 500 by sevens. Think of a fun holiday you have had, or imagine your favourite place.
- Talk to someone else. Get them to help distract you! If you need to, call a friend or family member. You don't need to tell them that you want them to distract you – as long as you talk about something other than your health, it may help take your mind off your worries.

2.6 STOP FINDING OUT AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ABOUT ILLNESS

Too much information about your health can make you more aware of every symptom and change in your body. Most symptoms can be caused by many different things – and many symptoms are nothing to worry about at all. Trying to diagnose yourself can be incorrect and very worrying.

- Stop reading medical books or encyclopaedias, and stop looking up your symptoms on the internet.
- This may increase your worry in the short-term – but remember, it will help decrease your worry in the long-term.
- When you feel the urge to “research”, use distraction to help take your mind off it.
- Ask your friends and family to remind you stop.



Again, keeping a diary can be helpful. As you spend less time finding out about illness, you will find that you worry less about your health.

	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thu.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
Number of times I found out about illness							
How worried I felt (0-100)							

Try keeping this diary for a few weeks, and watch what happens to your anxiety as you stop spending so much time finding out about illness.

2.7 STOP AVOIDING THINGS TO DO WITH ILLNESS

While some people spend too much time finding out about illness, other people avoid any information at all about health (or their feared illness) because it increases their anxiety. You may find that you avoid TV programmes about your feared illness, or avoid reading articles in the newspapers or magazines. Again, this decreases anxiety in the short-term, but increases it in the long-term. So what can you do?



Make a list of the ways in which you have been avoiding information about your feared illness. Rate for each how strong your avoidance has been (0 = not very strong at all, 100 = very strong avoidance). Start with the one you have avoided the least, and plan to spend a little bit of time doing just this. When this one feels more manageable, move on to the next one, and gradually work your way up the list.

Here is Mary's example:

What I have avoided	How much I avoided it
Watching TV programmes about cancer	10
Reading articles about cancer in the newspaper or in magazines	8
Listening to other people talk about cancer	6

Mary would start this exercise by not walking away when she hears other people talking about cancer. For example, at first, she might try to stay in the conversation for five minutes, then move up to five minutes. When this feels manageable, she might try to read a short article on cancer in the newspaper, and then try a longer one. And so on. When she finds a task to be anxiety provoking, she may have to challenge her worrisome thoughts about anxiety (see section C).

Make your own list here:

What I have avoided	How much I avoided it

It is a good idea to keep a record of your anxiety levels as you tackle each of these activities.

2.8 WHAT ELSE ARE YOU AVOIDING?

Are you avoiding physical activity or exerting yourself? Are you sitting or lying down whenever you notice a particular symptom? The trouble with stopping your normal activities is that it decreases your fitness level – this can make you feel unwell, tired, and aching. When you try to exert yourself, you will feel even worse. This is not due to illness, but do to you becoming less fit – but when you notice these things (e.g., fatigue, breathlessness when you increase your activity level), you may misinterpret them as signs of illness. This may make you slow down even more – and the vicious circle continues.



- Resume physical activities slowly. If you have been inactive for a while, you won't be able to as much as you once could. You will have to ease back into it.
- Make a list of the things you used to do that you would like to do again. Put them in order, with the one requiring the least energy first, and finish with the one that requires the most effort.

List of activities I have been avoiding

- Spend a little bit of time doing the activity you put first on your list. Do this gently – for example, if you wanted to go for a walk, you may want to start with a five minute walk. When you feel comfortable, take a longer walk.
- When you feel comfortable with that activity, move on to the next one on your list. Remember to ease yourself into it.

- Go through the list of activities, one by one.

This booklet has provided you with information about health anxiety, and what you can do to help reduce this anxiety. Getting over health anxiety takes a lot of work. It is a good idea to work through these exercises slowly – at your own pace. Keep a record of your progress (for example, a record of your daily anxiety levels) – this way, you can look back at what has happened as you complete more and more of the exercises. Challenging your thoughts about illness can be very helpful – this is a skill you can use when you are trying the other practice exercises. *Remember that you are not trying to get rid of the physical symptoms – the goal is to reduce your anxiety about these symptoms.*

Evidence that I am seriously ill.	Evidence that I am not seriously ill.

Worrying thought	How worried was I? (0-100)	Alternate, more rational, thought	New rating of worry (0-100)

MANUAL EVALUATION

We would be very grateful to hear about what you think of this manual. It is an evolving document and we will attempt to incorporate people's suggestions.

Are there any parts of the manual that are unclear or difficult to understand?

Are there any parts that were very useful for you?

Do you have any suggestions that would make the manual more effective?

Any other comments:

Please detach this page and send it to:

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(Panic Manual)
Department of Psychological Treatment Services
Box 190 – S Block
Addenbrooke's Hospital
Cambridge CB2 2QQ**

Thank you.
