

Helping Health Anxiety

Module 5

Re-evaluating Unhelpful Health Related Thinking

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Introduction

In Module 3, we talked about how our health anxiety can remain dormant for some time, but when triggered is likely to negatively affect the way we think about our bodily symptoms or sensations, and health-related information. In Module 4, we practiced disengaging our attention from these distressing symptoms or worries by first building up our attention muscle and then learning to put off or “postpone” our worries until a later time. In this Module, we will examine what you can do with these negative and often unhelpful thoughts once you get to your elected “worry period”. We will examine these thoughts in more detail, and discuss ways of evaluating and overcoming them.

The Mind-Body Connection

What you think, and the thoughts that go through your mind, are very important in determining how you feel. Stop for a moment and think: when you are feeling good, what sorts of thoughts roam around in your head? Conversely, when you are feeling bad, what sorts of thoughts are you having?

It makes sense to most people when we say that:

It is not the situation you are in that determines how you feel, but the thoughts, meanings, and interpretations you bring to that situation.

Here is an example of what we mean. Imagine you are in bed at night and hear a loud noise. Below are three different ways of thinking about this same situation and the different emotions, physical sensations, and behaviours that could result from thinking in these different ways.

Example event: <i>In bed at night, hear a loud noise</i>			
	Emotions	Physical	Behaviour
<u>Thought 1</u> <i>I bet that was my naughty little cat. I wonder what kind of mischief he has just got up to</i>	<i>Amused</i>	<i>Smiling, quite relaxed</i>	<i>Laugh, call for cat</i>
<u>Thought 2</u> <i>Oh no, someone must be trying to break in!!</i>	<i>Anxious</i>	<i>Heart racing, tense, sweating</i>	<i>Concentrate on further noises, grab phone and begin to dial for police</i>
<u>Thought 3</u> <i>Hmm. The neighbours must be putting their bins out.</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Quite relaxed</i>	<i>Go back to sleep</i>

Because we are usually not aware of these thoughts, we may not realise just how much they are affecting us. Can you now see how what we think can be so important in determining how we feel emotionally and physically, and can influence what we do?

Overall, having our thoughts influence our emotional and physical state is usually a fairly helpful process. After all, if someone *really is* breaking in to our house - having your anxiety response kick in, including having your heart beat faster and starting to sweat means you are physically more prepared to deal with that threatening situation.



However, people with health anxiety often *perceive* that there is a greater threat to their health than there actually is. This doesn't mean that you are imagining the symptoms -

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those symptoms are real! But if you interpret or think about the symptoms in a catastrophic way, this will often bring about intense negative feelings and sensations in your body.

People with health anxiety tend to:

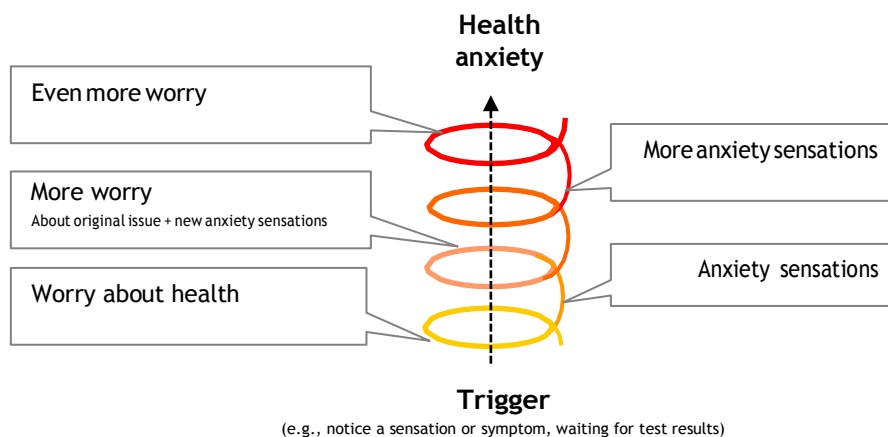
- Overestimate the likelihood that they have or will develop a serious health problem
- Overestimate how bad things will be
- Ignore or discount other possible (and often less catastrophic) explanations for their symptoms or their doctors response, and
- Underestimate their ability to treat, cope with or manage a health problem

Here are some examples of common thoughts experienced by people with health anxiety:

I've been so tired and run-down - I could have leukaemia
My mother had cancer so there's a pretty good chance I'll get it too
My heart is racing - I am going to have a heart attack
I could get a serious illness and die
I'm sure I have diabetes as I've been to the bathroom four times today
My side is aching - this could be ovarian or stomach cancer
I've been having weird thoughts - I could be schizophrenic and not know it
This operation could kill me
I've never seen this mole before - it could be a melanoma
I've had diarrhoea for three days - this could be colon cancer
I have a headache - this could be a brain tumour or an aneurism
My knees hurt - I must have arthritis
I keep forgetting things - this could be the start of dementia
I've been feeling really weak lately - this could be a sign of multiple sclerosis



As each of these health related thoughts are about a potential threat to one's health and well-being, it will likely trigger our anxiety response. This is the mind-body connection in action! Unfortunately, this can then become a vicious cycle of worrying about our health, triggering more anxiety sensations, noticing these sensations as well and then worrying even more.



Fortunately, something can be done about this vicious cycle. This Module will explore how we can begin to break this cycle by identifying and challenging those worrisome thoughts you are having about your health.

Note: While we have touched on the idea of behaviours that come about from these thoughts, we will come back to these in Modules 6 and 7

How to Address Unhelpful Health Related Thoughts

One way to help address unhelpful health related thoughts is to challenge them head on. Remember that our thoughts are just that, thoughts. Sometimes our thoughts will be accurate, sometimes they will only be partially correct, and sometimes they will not represent the reality of the situation at all. The only way we can work out how accurate our thoughts really are is to question, dissect and evaluate them.

A helpful way to think about this is to imagine that you are a detective - collecting evidence for and against a case, considering other possible causes and explanations, and trying to work out the most accurate and likely explanation. Evaluating these thoughts isn't something you should try to do in your head as this can get messy and confusing. The best way is to write it down and we suggest using a Thought Diary to help you through this process. Thought Diaries are designed to guide you through the evaluation process step by step, on paper, making things clearer and more helpful for you.

On the next few pages are instructions and an example of how to complete a Thought Diary. Following that is a blank Thought Diary for you to practise on.

The Thought Diary will first ask you to **Identify Your Unhelpful Health Related Thoughts**. To help you do that, first ask yourself:

- What triggered off this episode of health anxiety?

Then:

- What am I worrying about?
- What am I predicting?
- What conclusions am I jumping to?

After you have written these down, underline the most bothersome of these thoughts and rate the strength of your belief between 0 and 100%.

You'll then need to ask yourself - when I am thinking like this, what do I feel?

- What emotion(s) am I feeling? (e.g., worry, fear, sadness, concern, anxiety)
- Rate the intensity of your emotion(s) between 0 and 100%
- What physical sensations(s) do I notice? (e.g., heart racing, muscular tension, fatigue)

Once you have completed the first section, you are ready to begin to **Challenge Your Unhelpful Health Related Thoughts**. Here are the questions asked in your Thought Diary to challenge these types of thoughts:

- What is the factual evidence *for* this thought?
- What is the factual evidence *against* this thought?
Note: Be sure to include only good quality evidence - see pages 9-10 for a summary
- How does it affect me when I expect the worst?
- What could I do to cope if 'the worst' did happen?
- Are there any other possible explanations for my symptoms, or for my doctor's response?
- What is the most likely explanation?
- What can I do to cope with this symptom or situation right now?



The ultimate aim of doing this Thought Diary is for you to **Develop more Realistic Health Related Thoughts**. Once you have explored the answers to the above 'challenging' questions in your Thought Diary, ask yourself:

- What would be a more realistic thought about this symptom or situation?

The final step is then to:

- Re-rate how much you now believe your original thought,
- Re-rate the intensity of the emotions that you were originally feeling,
- Rate whether there has been any change in your physical sensations.

If you experience only a few unhelpful health related thoughts per day, and they are not taking up a significant amount of your time or interfering with your daily activities, we recommend that you start to practice using a Thought Diary whenever you notice you are feeling anxious or worried about your health.

However, if you experience numerous unhelpful health related thoughts throughout the day, and the amount of time spent thinking about your health is interfering with your daily activities, we recommend that you combine the worry postponement exercise from Module 4 with using these Thought Diaries. This means that whenever you catch yourself worrying about your health, you postpone any further thoughts about your health until a later specified time and place. When you get to this specific time and place, then you can spend time completing the Thought Diary to evaluate your thoughts.

If you work through the entire Thought Diary for challenging your unhelpful health related thoughts, it is likely that you will experience a decrease in the strength of your belief and therefore a decrease in the intensity of your emotions and physiological sensations. While it will take some effort and practice, we recommend that you continue to use the thought diaries until it becomes second nature to stop and question your thoughts.

Thought Diary - Example

Identify Unhelpful Health Related Thoughts

What triggered off this episode of anxiety?	
<i>Received a negative test result for an iron deficiency after feeling tired and run-down for several weeks. Doctor said to just monitor my symptoms and come back if it gets worse.</i>	
What am I worrying about? What am I predicting? What conclusions am I jumping to?	
<i>If it is not an iron deficiency, it must be something much worse My doctor hasn't tested for more serious problems <u>This tiredness could mean something serious, like leukaemia</u></i>	
Underline the most bothersome thought and then rate how much I believe it (0-100%)? 80%	
When I am thinking like this, what do I feel?	
Emotions (Rate the intensity 0-100%): <i>Worried (90%)</i>	Physical sensations: <i>Heart rate increases, chest feels heavy</i>

Challenge Unhelpful Health Related Thoughts

What is the factual evidence <u>for</u> this thought?	What is the evidence <u>against</u> this thought?
<i>- I have been feeling tired - I have looked on the internet and tiredness and fatigue are symptoms of leukaemia - The test results showed it is not an iron deficiency - My doctor didn't specifically test for leukaemia</i>	<i>- My doctor said tiredness and fatigue are very common and may be related to stress - I don't have the other symptoms of leukaemia (swollen lymph nodes, frequent infections, bruising easily, unexplained weight loss, or pain in my joints and bones)</i>
How does it affect me when I think about the worst?	
<i>Makes me feel anxious and a bit angry at my doctor for not doing some more tests Find it hard not to focus on the tiredness</i>	
What could I do to cope if 'the worst' did happen?	
<i>I would have to start treatment. This would probably involve chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant if a match could be found for me. I would have to think about the possibility of death. The entire experience would probably be quite difficult but I would have the support of family and friends.</i>	
Are there any other possible explanations for my symptoms, or for my doctor's response?	
<i>Have I recently changed my routine, diet, medications, or activity levels? Do I need to improve these? Have I been experiencing increased stress lately, or have I experienced a minor medical ailment - such as a cold, that could account for what I am feeling? I have been quite busy and stressed at work lately. I probably haven't been looking after myself or sleeping as well as usual. My doctor probably sees a lot of people who are feeling this way, who don't have leukaemia, so isn't too concerned about it.</i>	
What is the most likely explanation?	
<i>I am just run down and need to look after myself a bit better</i>	
What can I do to cope with this symptom or situation right now?	
<i>I will make sure I buy some fresh fruit and vegetables to eat, rather than just getting by on coffee. I will also take some time out for myself to relax by having a bubble-bath, will go to bed a little earlier, and will ask for some help to manage a big project at work.</i>	

Develop Realistic Health Related Thoughts

What's a more realistic thought about this symptom or situation?			
<i>This is probably just a sign that I am stressed and run down. I don't have any other symptoms so my doctor probably isn't very worried about this tiredness.</i>			
How much do I believe my original thought now (0-100%)	40%		
How intense are my emotions now (0-100%)	30%		
How intense are my physical sensations now (Circle)	More intense	Same	Less intense

Thought Diary

Identify Unhelpful Health Related Thoughts

What triggered off this episode of anxiety?
What am I worrying about? What am I predicting? What conclusions am I jumping to?
Underline the most bothersome thought and then rate how much I believe it (0-100%)?
When I am thinking like this, what do I feel? Emotions (Rate the intensity 0-100%): _____ Physical sensations: _____

Challenge Unhelpful Health Related Thoughts

What is the factual evidence <u>for</u> this thought?	What is the evidence <u>against</u> this thought?
How does it affect me when I think about the worst?	
What could I do to cope if 'the worst' did happen?	
Are there any other possible explanations for my symptoms, or for my doctor's response? Have I recently changed my routine, diet, medications, or activity levels? Do I need to improve these? Have I been experiencing increased stress lately, or have I experienced a minor medical ailment - such as a cold, that could account for what I am feeling?	
What is the most likely explanation?	
What can I do to cope with this symptom or situation right now?	

Develop Realistic Health Related Thoughts

What's a more realistic thought about this symptom or situation?
How much do I believe my original thought now (0-100%)
How intense are my emotions now (0-100%)
How intense are my physical sensations now (Circle) More intense Same Less intense

Summary of My Thought Diaries

Once you have completed several thought diaries, you can complete this worksheet as a quick reference guide to remind you of your new realistic health related thoughts. That way, if the same or a similar unhelpful and distressing thought pops up, you can simply review this worksheet rather than trawl back through all of your completed thought diaries. However, if you feel like when you read something from the “New Realistic Health Related Thought” column that you don’t actually believe it, you may need to go back and complete another thought diary on that issue.

Original Unhelpful Health Related Thought	New Realistic Health Related Thought
<i>e.g., This could be something serious, like leukaemia</i>	<i>This is probably just a sign that I am stressed and run down. I don't have any other symptoms so my doctor probably isn't very worried about this tiredness.</i>

An Important Word on “Factual Evidence”

With the wealth of information readily available to us via the media and internet search engines, it is important for us to remain smart consumers of the information we receive. When completing these thought diaries we are asked to consider “factual evidence” both for and against our thoughts. But how can we tell whether the information we have is “factual” or not?

Unfortunately, not all health information available in magazines, newspapers and on the internet goes through a quality control process. Some websites, for example, may look quite convincing on the surface, but not actually represent the best practice and most up to date health-related information. This can be both confusing and dangerous for us.



It can be **confusing** when we receive mixed messages about whether or not we need to make changes to important things such as our diets, medications, or other lifestyle choices. It can also be confusing when we receive mixed messages about the importance of particular symptoms, their relevance to serious health problems, and the need to continue to seek help from health professionals. It can be **potentially dangerous** when we do make decisions about our health or changes based on information that is not reliable or factual.

While we will talk a lot more in the next module about seeking information from various sources, by changing the way we search for and evaluate health information, we can start to reduce any confusion and risks and begin to take a more helpful and critical stance.

Information seeking

Quite often we can turn the very thing we are thinking about into the phrase we type into an internet search engine. For example, if we are concerned about the impacts of worrying on our potential for a heart attack, we may type “worry and heart attacks” and hit Search.

This type of searching can be problematic as it can lead to biased results. That is, you will most likely

- filter in web pages that do talk about there being links between worry and heart attacks, and
- filter out any that do not talk about or debunk such links.

This unhelpful searching can therefore reinforce your worrisome belief that there is a link!!

There are two steps you can take to change the way you gather and filter information from the internet.

Step 1: Practice using more helpful and less biased search phrases to find out what you want to know. For example,

Instead of:
“Worry and heart attacks”

You could try:
“What causes heart attacks?” or “Leading causes of heart attacks”

Less helpful
More biased filtering

More helpful
Less biased filtering



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Step 2: Look for ways of filtering in alternative view points. You can do this by typing in mismatching statements. For example, you could try: “Is coffee bad for you?” and “Is coffee good for you?” These strategies can lead to you coming up with some very different health information!

If you are someone who has or is thinking about using the internet to search for health information, take a moment to think about some alternative ways you could search for that information:

Instead of:

I could (also) try:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Evaluating health information

Even with good search strategies we will often come across unhelpful or even conflicting information (e.g., one magazine article stating that coffee is good for you whilst another states that coffee is bad for you).



Unfortunately, in this day and age, anyone with access to the internet can send information around the world and claim it to be factual. Some website or magazine articles can also appear to contain useful information from reputable sources. So how do we know what is good information and what is not so good?

Ten questions to ask...

- Is this written by a qualified and registered health professional (e.g., GP, Psychologist)?
- Does the author represent an established and reputable health organisation (e.g., government body, university, major hospital)?
- Is the author free of commercial interests (i.e., they are not trying to sell you a product or sensationalise a story to sell a magazine)?
- Does the article include multiple pieces of evidence to back up its claims (i.e., discusses the results of several research studies conducted by reputable organisations rather than anecdotal stories or one-off studies)?
- Is enough information provided for you to check the background research for yourself?
- Was the background research based on people similar to yourself (e.g., similar age, height/weight, gender, diagnosis, comorbid problems etc)?
- Was the background research based on many people?
- Are statistics clearly explained?
- Is this information consistent with health information you have read from other reputable sources, (e.g., other government bodies, universities, major hospitals)?
- Is a review date provided so that you can tell the information is up-to-date?

The more ticks you have above, the better your health information is likely to be. However, it is important to remember that information from the internet and media is one resource only, and should never alone be used to diagnose a medical or psychological condition, or to make important changes to your medication, diet, or other lifestyle choices. Your GP or local health clinic can assist you in understanding the specific risks and benefits of such changes based on your full personal medical and/or psychological history.



Module Summary

- Our thoughts influence our emotional state and the presence of some physical sensations in our bodies. This is known as the mind-body connection.
- People with health anxiety tend to:
 - Overestimate the likelihood that they have or will develop a serious health problem
 - Overestimate how bad things will be
 - Ignore or discount other possible (and often less catastrophic) explanations for their symptoms or their doctors response, and
 - Underestimate their ability to treat, cope with or manage a health problem
- When we think there is a threat to our health, we can trigger off our anxiety response. This gives us more physical sensations, which we may then also worry about. This can lead to a vicious cycle of health anxiety.
- One way to overcome this vicious cycle of health anxiety is to challenge our unhelpful health related thoughts head-on using a Thought Diary. This involves identifying what you are predicting or worried about, challenging your predictions or expectations, and developing more realistic health related thoughts.
- If we are using evidence from the internet or media to weigh-up the likelihood of our health-related thoughts being true, we need to ensure that we access information from established, reputable, and unbiased health organisations.



Coming up next ...

In the next module, we will start exploring ways to reduce excessive checking and reassurance-seeking behaviours.

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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