

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Keeps Health Anxiety Going?



Description

A little bit of concern about your health is normal, and even healthy! If you have **health anxiety**, worries about your health can take over your life and cause you a lot of distress. If you have health anxiety you might find yourself:

- Worried about having or getting a serious illness.
- Excessively anxious.
- Not feeling reassured by negative test results.
- Repeatedly checking your body for signs of illness.

Research studies have shown that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one of the most effective treatments for health anxiety (Cooper et al, 2017). CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while the fire is burning they aren't very interested in what caused it, but are more focused on what is keeping it going. This is because if they can work out what keeps the problem going, they can treat it by 'removing the fuel' and interrupting its maintaining cycle.

Psychologists including Paul Salkovskis, Stanley Rachman, Gordon Asmundson, Adrian Wells and Ann Hackman have identified key components that are thought to explain why some people keep suffering from health anxiety. The *What Keeps Health Anxiety Going?* information handout describes some of these key factors, which act to maintain health anxiety. It illustrates these maintaining factors in a vicious flower format in which each 'petal' represents a separate maintenance cycle. Helping clients to understand more about the cognitive model is an essential part of cognitive therapy for health anxiety. Therapists can use this handout as a focus for discussion, or as a template from which to formulate an idiosyncratic model of a client's experiences of health anxiety.

Instructions

Suggested Question



One interesting way of thinking about health anxiety is to look at why, for some people, it does not get better by itself. This handout shows some of the most common reasons why some people's health anxiety persists. I wonder if we could look at it together and think about whether it describes what is happening for you?

References

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What Keeps Health Anxiety Going?

People who suffer from health anxiety tend to interpret triggers as threats to their health. Triggers might include:

- Body sensations (e.g. pain, fatigue).
- Changes in appearance.
- Changes in body function.
- Information about health risks.
- Being near ill people.

Being in the habit of interpreting the world as a threat can leave you blind to more likely and less threatening possibilities.

Treatment for health anxiety involves testing your beliefs about danger and your health.

If someone told you there was an escaped tiger in your neighborhood, you would probably keep a lookout when you were out and about. It's the same for body sensations that you think are dangerous, especially those that you think could be signs of an impending catastrophe.

The problem with always being on the lookout is that you're more likely to notice things. Even harmless body sensations can set off a 'false alarm' and trigger anxiety.



Most people with health anxiety have powerful unwanted images that play in their minds. The images are often about:

- Suffering or dying from a serious or life-threatening illness.
- Being told 'the bad news' that you have a life-threatening illness.
- The impact of own death or serious illness on people you love.

Psychologists know that mental images can cause the same feelings as facing the 'real thing', so intrusive images can keep your anxiety going. Understandably, people often respond to these images by distracting themselves, or pushing them away – but unfortunately this tends to mean the images keep coming back.

Safety-seeking behaviors are the things that you do to prevent feared threats from hurting you. People with health anxiety often engage in:

- Avoidance (e.g. hospitals, sick people, mentally ill people).
- Checking (e.g. your body, memory, vision).
- Seeking reassurance (e.g. from health professionals, from the Internet).
- Distraction or suppressing thoughts.

The problem is that safety behaviors can prevent you from learning how safe your feared situations truly are, how capable you are of managing risks, or how to live with uncertainty.

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Resource details

Title: What Keeps Health Anxiety Going?

Type: Information Handout

Language: English (US)

Translated title: What Keeps Health Anxiety Going?

URL: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/what-keeps-health-anxiety-going>

Resource format: Professional

Version: 20230721

Last updated by: JP

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