

Helping Health Anxiety

Module I

Understanding Health Anxiety

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Introduction

From time to time, we will all worry about things like relationships, work, finances, and, of course, our health. Everyone, at some point or another, will notice sensations or changes in their bodies, will wonder whether they could have a serious medical problem, and will take steps to relieve their health worries and concerns. However, there is a difference between general concern about health, which we all have from time to time, and more problematic health anxiety.

Are you a person who finds that you worry a great deal about your health? Have you noticed that your effort to find answers for your symptoms is impacting on you in a negative way? If so, you may want to keep reading these “Helping Health Anxiety” Modules.

The aim of this current module is to provide you with some general information about health anxiety, to discover whether health anxiety is a problem for you, and to discuss the negative impacts of health anxiety.

What Is Health?

Before we talk about health anxiety, it is important that we first consider what “health” is and to recognise that health means different things to different people.

Many people will consider health to mean the absence of disease, injury or disability. However, the meaning of health changes from person to person, and across cultures and continents. For example, an extremely fit athlete might consider themselves to be unhealthy if they suffer an injury that prevents them from training. However, a person with a diagnosed condition, such as diabetes or asthma, could consider themselves as healthy if they are managing their condition well.

Most definitions of health therefore extend beyond the concept of a mere absence of disease, injury or disability, to include a person’s state of physical, mental and social functioning. Most importantly, rather than thinking about health in black and white terms (i.e., we either *have* or *don’t have* health in these areas), most definitions of health consider these three areas of functioning to be on a continuum ranging from very poor to excellent.

Before we go any further, take a few moments to describe your overall health

Now notice how you described your health. What did you focus on? What aspects of health stood out as being the most important to you? Did you consider you physical, mental *and* social functioning and wellbeing?



What Is Health Anxiety?

Anxiety comes about at times when we think something bad might or will happen. This is actually a survival instinct and can be particularly helpful for us in real life-threatening situations. For example, if you are confronted by a dangerous animal it is helpful for your brain to recognise the threat and to tell your body to run, hide, or get ready to fight. Your body will therefore go through a range of physiological changes known as the “fight or flight” response, which helps to prepare our bodies and protect us from danger.



There are times however when we can experience an anxiety response due simply to a *perceived threat*. Have you been concerned that others might dislike a speech you are about to give and noticed your heart beating faster? Have you ever walked through a dark alley at night and felt tense while worrying that something bad might happen? In both of these situations something bad may or may not happen, but what is important, is that if you *believe* there is some danger you will usually feel some level of anxiety.

Health anxiety therefore refers to the experience of thinking that there may be a threat to your health, which consequently triggers your anxiety response.

While we may think and worry about any number of health related issues, some of the more common health related fears include having or developing cancer, Alzheimer’s Disease, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, a mental illness such as schizophrenia, a thyroid disorder, or that you may have a heart attack. Not everyone thinks about specific problems though. Your fears could be more general, in that you simply think that something is “not quite right”.

In what ways do you worry about your health? What would you consider to be the greatest threats to your overall health? Do you worry about particular physical symptoms? Is there a particular health problem, illness or disease that you are concerned (or even convinced) that you may have now or will develop in the future?

In some cases, the fear we have may even be about the health of a loved one. For example, a parent who has noticed their child is tired frequently may become worried that their child has leukaemia, or a person who has noticed that their partner has been coughing frequently may begin to worry that they have lung cancer. While these modules are directed at worries you may have about your own health, most of the exercises could also be also used if you are anxious about the health of a loved one.



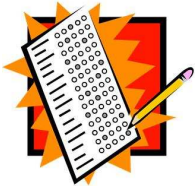
When is Health Anxiety a Problem?

To a certain extent, milder forms of health anxiety can affect us all from time to time. Who hasn't been concerned when we are waiting for some test results to come back, or had some worrisome thoughts about a new lump or bump that we have noticed? So, at what point does mild health anxiety become a problem? While having concerns about your health and seeking advice and appropriate health checks are something that all human beings experience, as with anything, too much of something can be bad for you.

Health concerns can become a problem when they:

- are **excessive**,
- are **out of proportion** to the realistic likelihood of having an actual and serious medical problem
- are **persistent** despite negative test results and/or reassurance from your health practitioner,
- lead to **unhelpful behaviours** such as excessive checking, reassurance seeking (e.g., from doctors, family or friends), or avoidance (e.g., of check-ups, doctors, health related information), and
- cause you significant **distress**, or **impair** your ability to go about your day-to-day life.

This is when normal health concerns become *health anxiety*. From this point forward, when we talk about health anxiety, we will be referring to problematic levels of health anxiety.



Let's find out if health anxiety is an issue for you. Here are a few statements for you to consider:

	Never	Occasionally	Often	Very Often
I worry about my health				
I worry that I may have or will develop a serious medical problem				
I worry that bodily sensations/changes are a sign of a serious medical problem				
I find it difficult to control or let go of my health worries				
I mentally scan my body and/or mind for signs that something is wrong				
I focus my attention on my bodily sensations or symptoms				
I have difficulty concentrating on things other than my bodily sensations or symptoms				
I physically check my body for symptoms and changes				
I frequently visit health professionals (e.g., GPs, specialists) to discuss my health concerns and symptoms or to have tests performed				
I avoid health professionals (e.g., GPs, specialists) as I am too worried about my health and/or test results				
I have continued to worry about my health despite my doctor's reassurance or despite negative tests				
I search for information about my symptoms (e.g., on the internet, in books, in pamphlets from health clinics)				
I discuss my symptoms with family and/or friends				
I avoid people, places or activities that trigger off health worries				
I avoid people, places or activities that trigger off particular physical sensations				

If you have answered most of the above questions with Often or Very Often, then health anxiety might be something you want to work on. Even if you have only answered Often or Very Often for a few of the above statements, you may still want to stay with us as you might learn some skills that could be useful in the future.

BUT I HAVE REAL SYMPTOMS?!?!

It is important to recognise that health anxiety can exist in people who are “healthy”, in people who are experiencing real yet unexplained medical symptoms, and in people who have an existing and diagnosed medical condition. This means that the physical symptoms you experience that are at the centre of your health anxiety are not “all in your head”.

Whether or not you have real symptoms or an actual medical condition is not the main issue when it comes to health anxiety. The issue is how you are responding to and coping with your symptoms or condition. If you respond to health issues or symptoms with excessive and persistent worrying, checking, reassurance seeking or avoidance, then health anxiety may still be a problem.



Negative Impacts of Health Anxiety

Health anxiety can impact on us in numerous negative ways. Below are the most common areas affected by health anxiety.

Relationships with family / friends. Time spent worrying about your health or seeking help from professionals may impact on your ability to socialise or attend to important family matters. Family and friends may join you in your worrying, leading to everyone feeling more distressed. On the other hand, they may become frustrated with you if you continue to worry despite negative test results or ongoing reassurance. In some cases, you may feel let down by or even angry towards your family or friends for not understanding what you are going through, or for not helping in your efforts to find out what is wrong.

Work or study. Many people with health anxiety find it difficult to stop worrying about and checking for signs of illness. All this worrying can impact on your ability to concentrate and focus on the task at hand. Work or study time may also be taken up by medical appointments or internet searching leading to you falling behind in your work or study tasks.

Life enjoyment and satisfaction. Focussing on potential health problems can lead you to have a skewed negative outlook and may even lead to depressed mood. In some cases, you may become so focussed on your health concerns and seeking certainty about your health that you will stop doing things that you used to enjoy or that gave you a sense of achievement (e.g., exercise, socialising). This withdrawal leads to further depressed mood as you limit your opportunities for fun and success.

Relationships with health professionals. Repeated trips to the doctor without clear results can leave both you and your health provider feeling dissatisfied. You may even begin to feel frustrated or angry towards your health provider or towards the health system entirely! In some cases, you may have even had the experience of feeling like your health provider does not believe you or thinks you are a “hypochondriac”. In some cases, your doctor may have even said this too you!

Obviously, this is neither helpful for you or your health professional. We want our health providers to be on board with responding to our health needs. In turn, most health providers want to help us work out why we are feeling the way we do, and to help us reduce, eliminate or manage our health worries and problems.



Finances. Multiple or repeated medical tests or procedures, time spent away from work, and even travel costs to attend medical appointments can soon start to add up. For some people, the worry, checking and reassurance seeking behaviours associated with health anxiety can become so overwhelming or time-consuming that you are no longer able to work.

Unpleasant anxiety symptoms. As already discussed, each time you worry about your health you set off your fight/flight response. People experiencing health anxiety may therefore feel restless, physically tense, or unable to relax. They may also experience sleep disturbance, nausea, heart palpitations, chest pain or pressure, sweating, dizziness or light-headedness, tingling sensations, and feelings of detachment from part of or all of their body. Given you may already be worrying about your health, having more physiological symptoms can sometimes then gives you even more sensations to worry about!



If you are experiencing health anxiety, take a moment to write down how health anxiety is affecting you.

What You Can Expect From This Information Package

Whether you are experiencing excessive health worries alone, or in combination with unexplained or diagnosed health symptoms or conditions, this information package can help you begin to reduce your excessive worry and any unhelpful behaviours you may be engaging in.

We have begun with a discussion about what health anxiety is and what impact it can have on one's life. In the next two modules, we will explore and discuss how health anxiety develops and what keeps it going. The modules after these will focus on what you can do to overcome health anxiety.

The following are the modules that make up this information package:

- Module 1: Understanding Health Anxiety
- Module 2: How Health Anxiety Develops
- Module 3: What Keeps Health Anxiety Going?
- Module 4: Reducing Your Focus on Health Symptoms and Worries
- Module 5: Re-evaluating Unhelpful Health Related Thinking
- Module 6: Reducing Checking and Reassurance Seeking
- Module 7: Challenging Avoidance and Safety Behaviours
- Module 8: Adjusting Health Rules and Assumptions
- Module 9: Healthy Living and Self Management Planning

When using self-help materials, some people might skip sections or complete things in a different order. The modules in this information package have been designed to be completed in the order they appear. We recommend that you work through the modules in sequence, finishing each module before moving on to the next one in the series. We believe that by doing this, you will maximise the benefits you might receive from working through this information package.

We believe that this information package will be beneficial for anyone who would like to address any difficulties they might have with health anxiety. We encourage you to take this journey through all our modules, and hope that you will come away with a balanced view of your health and continue to engage in appropriate health seeking behaviours. You might find that it gets a little tough at times, but we encourage you to stay with it and keep on working through these modules until you reach the end. See you at the next module!



Module Summary

- To worry about your health is a normal human experience.
- Health anxiety refers to the excessive concern that there may be a threat to your health which triggers your anxiety (fight/flight) response.
- Health anxiety is problematic when it is excessive, out of proportion to the realistic chances of having a serious problem, persists despite negative tests and reassurance from health professionals, leads to excessive unhelpful behaviours such as body-checking and medical test-seeking, and causes you significant distress or impacts on your functioning.
- Health anxiety can exist in people who are “healthy”, in people who are experiencing real yet unexplained medical symptoms, and in people who have an existing and diagnosed medical condition. In health anxiety the issue is not whether your physical symptoms are real, but whether you are responding to and coping with your symptoms in a helpful or unhelpful way.
- Health anxiety can impact on your relationships with family and friends, and even with health professionals. It can also impact on your capacity to maintain work or study commitments, and affect your mood and finances.
- When you worry about your health, you trigger off your fight/flight response. This gives you more physiological symptoms which you may then also start to worry about.



Coming up next ...

In the next module, we will explore and learn more about how health anxiety develops.

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.

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These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

Abramowitz, J., Taylor, S., & McKay, D. (2010). Hypochondriasis and severe health anxiety. In McKay, D., Abramowitz, J., S., & Taylor, S. (Eds.). *Cognitive-behavior therapy: Turning failure into success* (pp. 327-346). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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Helping Health Anxiety

Module 2

How Health Anxiety Develops

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Introduction

So far we have looked at the difference between normal, everyday worries about health and more excessive and problematic levels of health anxiety. We have also considered some of the negative impacts health anxiety can have on our day-to-day functioning, relationships, and our life satisfaction and enjoyment. However, something that many people who experience this problem will ask is, “why do I have health anxiety?”

The exact cause of health anxiety is not known. While there is some evidence that health anxiety, like all anxiety disorders, may in part be an inherited or biologically based problem, it is generally accepted that several other important factors can increase the likelihood of you developing this problem. In this module, we will explore how some of these factors may contribute to the onset and development of health anxiety.

Negative Health Experiences

As discussed in Module 1, health anxiety refers to the excessive concern that there may be a threat to your health which then triggers off your anxiety (fight/flight) response. So where does this excessive concern come from? People who experience health anxiety often report the following prior experiences:

Having family members or others around you experience a serious illness

Especially during our childhood and adolescence, our experiences can influence how we view ourselves, how we view others, and how we view the future. If we witness someone experiencing pain and suffering it may lead to us feeling vulnerable and concerned that this could happen to us too. If we have witnessed someone with a progressive illness, we may feel quite helpless. We may even develop a sense that “illness” means “nothing can be done”. In circumstances where the illness experienced by a family member has a degree of heritability, we may start to focus on the likelihood that we too will develop the illness as opposed to the chance that we won’t.



Death of a family member or someone known to you

While death is an eventual certainty for all of us, on a day-to-day basis most of us can tolerate the uncertainty of not knowing when and how it will happen. However, if we are put in a situation where we are made to think about what our own death will be like and the impact our death will have on others, most people will feel somewhat uncomfortable. The death of someone close or known to us, whilst often distressing in itself, can increase our awareness of our own mortality and lead us to contemplate these issues. If we have witnessed someone suffer a prolonged disease prior to death, we may associate illness with intense suffering and certain death. If the death was sudden, and especially if it was of someone previously perceived to be “healthy”, it can lead to an increase in our sense of vulnerability and helplessness.

Having experienced a medical problem yourself

Experiencing a medical problem can lead us to being more “tuned in” to our bodily sensations and changes, and alert us to our chances of further medical issues or even death. When explaining a diagnosis, doctors will often review the possible risks and complications of the diagnosis with a patient, alerting us to previously unknown information. Furthermore, for people who have overcome a medical condition (e.g., cancer, or a heart attack), having experienced the problem once may increase the likelihood of the problem reoccurring. Focussing on the potential risks, complications, and chance of recurrence can increase our sense that there will be ongoing threats to our health, and make us feel more anxious.

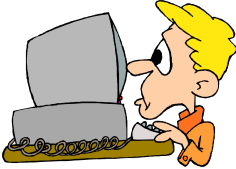


Having a family member with health anxiety

We tend to learn a lot about the world from those around us. So, if we have grown up observing or listening to others worry about health or frequently checking for signs of illness or injury, we are more likely to use these same coping strategies when we are confronted with health issues or sensations.

Negative information from the media or internet

The internet and media today allow us immediate access to a range of interesting health related stories and information. However, in an effort to “sell” their stories, media outlets must ensure that their shows or stories grab the attention of the public. Health stories in the media or on the internet can therefore focus on rare diseases, incurable health problems, and fatal conditions. Furthermore, they may report on the experiences of patients who were misdiagnosed, sometimes despite repeated efforts to seek medical help. While these cases do occur, the emphasis sometimes portrayed in the media on these unlikely conditions and events can lead us to question our medical care, to view benign bodily sensations and changes with greater suspicion, and to consider previously ignored and highly unlikely health problems as common.



Take a moment to write down what experiences you have had that may have increased your concerns about your health.

Heightened Health Vulnerability

It makes sense that these past negative health experiences may increase your overall sense of vulnerability regarding your own health. If you have been exposed to negative health experiences in your life, you may develop the belief that your health is vulnerable, and view illness as not only common but perhaps painful or deadly. With this sense of vulnerability hanging over you, it is only natural that you would focus your attention on bodily sensations or health problems which other people may simply ignore. The remainder of this module will focus on how you may try to decrease these feelings of vulnerability and protect your health by developing health rules and assumptions and by going on “high alert” for signs of illness.

Protecting Ourselves: Unhelpful Health Rules and Assumptions

Rules and assumptions can exist in all areas of our lives and are generally designed to help us function well and keep us in good health. For the most part, having rules and assumptions can provide us with helpful guidelines for living, so long as they are realistic and somewhat flexible. For example, I might have the rule that “I should brush my teeth twice daily to prevent decay” or the assumption that “If I don’t exercise regularly, then I will put on weight”. These rules and assumptions seem *helpful* in that they appear fairly accurate (i.e., it is generally accepted that a lack of exercise will lead to weight gain), and they are also flexible (i.e., while it is good to aim for twice daily teeth brushing, it is unlikely to be problematic if you forget to brush occasionally). However, we can also have more unhelpful rules and assumptions by which we try to lead our lives. A rule or assumption tends to be *unhelpful* when it is inaccurate and/or inflexible in some way.

At the heart of health anxiety lays certain unhelpful rules and assumptions, often comprised of inaccurate or inflexible “shoulds”, “musts” or “if... then” statements. Remember, that it is often due to your past experiences that you develop these rules or assumptions. For example, imagine that you have grown up with a very anxious parent, who would respond to any minor health complaint with one or more trips to the doctor and lots of time spent worrying, even if the doctor had said nothing was wrong. These experiences may lead you to develop some guidelines (i.e., rules and assumptions) about your health. You may develop a rule that “I must find out what is causing this sensation”. You may also begin to assume that “If I don’t report these symptoms, I could miss an important one”.



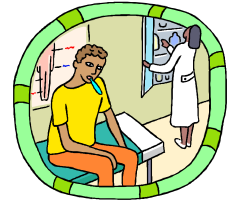
Keep in mind that your rules and assumptions have developed as a way of attempting to protect you, it is only when they become inaccurate and/or inflexible that they become a problem. Below are some common unhelpful rules and assumptions linked to health anxiety.

Health rules may include:

- “I must take all symptoms and bodily changes seriously”
- “I must be symptom free to be healthy”
- “I must report all new bodily sensations to a health professional”
- “I must have a diagnosis so I can move forward”
- “My doctor must be certain”
- “My doctor should be able to explain each of my bodily sensations and changes”

Health assumptions may include:

- “All discomfort and bodily changes are problematic”
- “If my doctor orders a test, then there must be something wrong”
- “If my doctor doesn’t know exactly what the problem is, then it must be really serious”
- “If I don’t get a clean bill of health from the doctor, then I must be ill”
- “If I don’t keep checking / having tests, I could miss something really important”
- “If I don’t persist, my Doctor may miss something important”
- “If I’m not vigilant, an underlying problem could be getting worse”
- “Once you are sick, there are no second chances”
- “If I miss an important health symptom, it could kill me”



Health rules and assumptions can also be combined as follows:

- “If my doctor can’t tell me exactly what it is, it must be serious and needs further investigating”
- “I must keep measuring the size of this lump, otherwise I won’t know if it is getting worse”
- “Doctors miss things, so I should see several different doctors until I get a clear diagnosis”

Take a moment to consider the sorts of rules or assumptions you may hold about your health. Take a few minutes to write these down. Also, take a moment to think about how this may be linked back to your past health-related experiences.

Protecting Ourselves: Increased Health Sensitivity

A very useful part of your fight/flight response is that it makes you focus your attention on possible threats and ways to escape these threats. For example, if you are walking through the bush looking at wildflowers and you come across a snake, your attention is likely to be drawn to the snake. You may find it hard to look at anything other than the snake, unless it is to look around for the safest path away or perhaps a stick to protect yourself with. At that moment, you are probably not focussed on the sound of the breeze blowing through the trees, the colour of the sky and clouds, whether your feet are feeling comfortable in your shoes, or the motion of birds as they dart between the trees above. Your attention has been drawn to focus on the threat before you in an effort to protect you from harm. You may also find that for the rest of your walk that day, you scan the ground more frequently and are in a generally higher state of alert. You may even jump at the sound of leaves rustling or the sight of slight movement out of the corner of your eye.



Most people, most of the time, will not pay much attention to minor discomfort, changes in their bodily functions (e.g., heart rate, saliva production), bodily noises, minor lumps and bumps that come and go, and increases or decreases in their energy levels. For the most part, we accept that our bodies are like noisy old cars – sometimes they run well, sometimes they run a little rough, but for the most part they just keep on running so long as we add fuel and get the occasional tune-up.

However, just as a snake might seem threatening to some of us and hence we become sensitive to its presence in order to protect ourselves; people with health anxiety believe their health is under threat, and become sensitive to their health in order to protect themselves.

In the case of health anxiety, you can become more sensitive or “tuned in” to signs or symptoms of illness. People with health anxiety will tend to pay closer attention to sensations or changes in their bodies, noticing things that others would simply not pay any attention to.

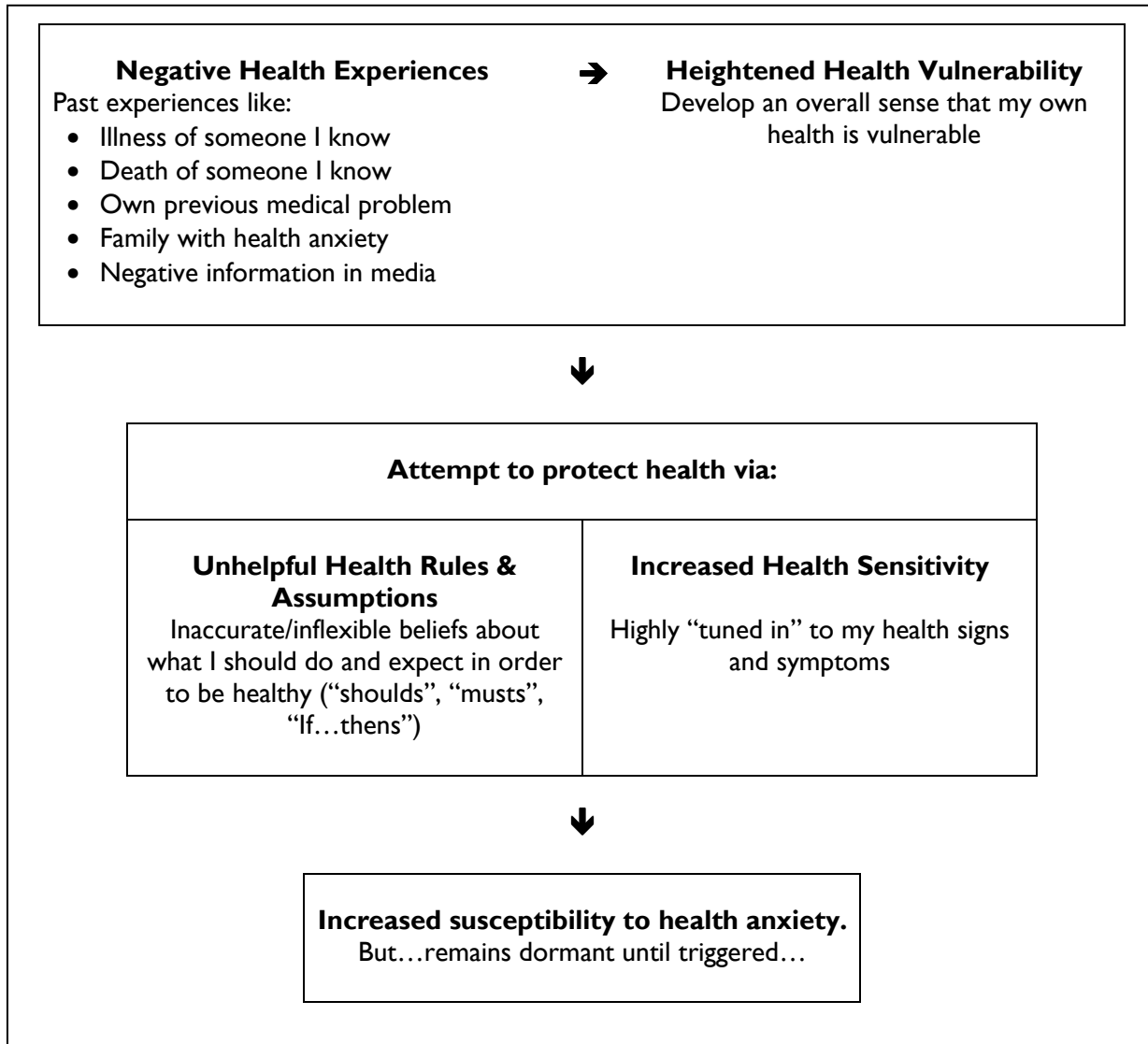


Unfortunately, focussing on a symptom can sometimes amplify the intensity of the symptom. Going back to our snake example, the more you focus on the snake the more aware you will become of the size, colour and shape of the snake. Similarly, the more you focus on your symptoms, the more aware you will become of the peculiarities of that symptom, and the more likely you will be to worry about and further focus on the symptom.

Take a moment to think about the signs or symptoms you tend to look for or worry about and record them below. Do you have a particular symptom and sensation you focus in on, or several things that you worry about and pay attention to? How much time do you spend each day focussing on that symptom or sensation?

Model of Health Anxiety: How Health Anxiety Develops

A useful way of pulling together the information covered so far is to place it in a diagram so that you can see how it all fits together. We call this diagram a “model”. Throughout this workbook we will often refer back to this model to remind ourselves as to how health anxiety may have developed. We will also add more information in the next module where we will examine what happens to keep health anxiety going.



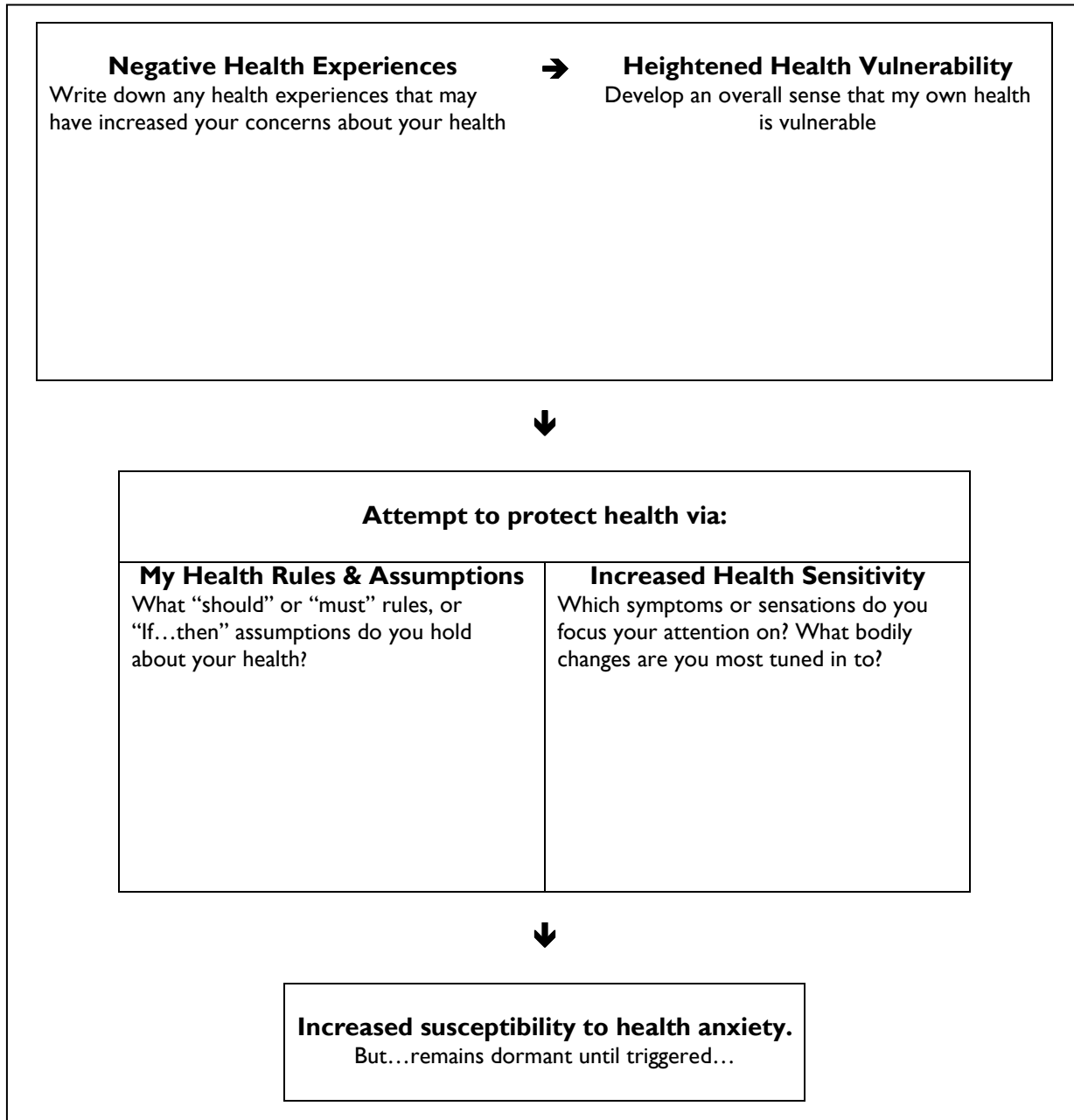
As you can see, this model identifies that our past experiences can increase our sense of vulnerability and general concerns about our health. In an effort to protect ourselves from harm, we will develop health rules and assumptions plus become more tuned in to our bodily changes and sensations.

Many people experience the kinds of life events we have discussed, and a proportion of us will have particular rules and assumptions about our health and be tuned in to bodily sensations and changes. We therefore may be at an increased susceptibility for health anxiety but it can lay dormant until one or more events trigger off or “activate” the health anxiety.

In the next module, we will discuss the kind of things that may trigger off an episode of health anxiety. We will also discuss a number of things that keep health anxiety going once it has been activated.

Worksheet: How Health Anxiety Develops

Let's take a moment to consider how your health experiences, your health rules and assumptions, and your awareness of your bodily sensations may have combined to increase the likelihood of you developing health anxiety. You can go back to the last few pages and copy your answers from each section in to the model below.



The Good News...

Given that your susceptibility to health anxiety is likely to have come from a combination of biological factors coupled with some negative health experiences from the past, it may at first seem a little discouraging because our biological make-up and our past experiences are something that we can't change. But the good news is that it doesn't necessarily matter how your susceptibility to health anxiety came about, when it comes to taking steps forward to change it. It is really important to read on, because as you will see in the next module, there are things we do in the 'here and now' that keep our health anxiety alive and well. And it is these things that we can tackle and change in order to overcome our health anxiety.

Module Summary

- Our earlier experiences can leave us feeling somewhat vulnerable and lead us to develop increased concerns about our health. Such experiences can include:
 - Having family members or others around you experience a serious illness
 - Death of a family member or someone known to you
 - Having a family member with health anxiety
 - Having experienced a medical illness yourself
 - Negative information from the media or internet
- Some people who have these experiences will go on to develop unhelpful health rules and assumptions, and become increasingly sensitive to bodily sensations and changes. We do this in an effort to protect ourselves from threats to our health and to reduce our overall sense of vulnerability.
- Health rules and assumptions are generally designed to help us function and keep us in good health. It is only when they become inaccurate and/or inflexible that they become unhelpful.
- People with health anxiety tend to pay closer attention to sensations or changes in their bodies, noticing things that others would simply not pay any attention to.
- Focussing on our bodily sensations and changes can sometimes amplify the intensity of the symptoms, in turn making it more likely that we will worry about and further focus on the symptom.
- While we may be susceptible to developing health anxiety due to our past experiences, rules and assumptions, and sensitivity to symptoms or changes, health anxiety can lay dormant until one or more events trigger off or “activate” the health anxiety.



Coming up next ...

In the next module, we will look at what triggers off health anxiety, and what then keeps it going.

About The Modules

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Helping Health Anxiety

Module 3

What Keeps Health Anxiety Going?

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Introduction

In Module 2, we explored how our past experiences may lead us to feel more vulnerable, increasing our concern about our health and making us more sensitive to bodily symptoms and changes. We also identified the concept of “dormant” health anxiety – where unless we are confronted by something that “activates” or triggers off our health anxiety, it may not bother us for periods of our life. In this module, we will discuss potential triggers to health anxiety, and explore how health anxiety is then maintained in the longer-term.

How Health Anxiety is Triggered

If you ask any friend or family member whether they have ever worried about their health, most people will probably admit to having some health-related concerns from time to time. Interestingly, the same things that would make any other person worry about their health could trigger off an episode of health anxiety. It is usually when these triggers are combined with a set of inflexible and inaccurate health rules or assumptions that health anxiety is triggered. These triggers can be something internal within us or external in our environment.

Internal triggers

Remember in the last module we talked about our bodies as being like old cars. Over time they will develop some strange noises and start to run a bit rougher.



All-in-all, it is normal to feel some symptoms and sensations in your body. This can include stomach discomfort, tingling or numbness in parts of your body, ringing in your ears, sensitivity to heat or cold in your teeth, increases or decreases in your heart rate, changes in your saliva production, and variations in your energy levels. Sometimes new or unfamiliar symptoms may begin for you, such as the onset of headaches or development of a rash. Many women whilst pregnant will also report a range of new and sometimes bizarre sensations in their bodies. You may even have unusual sensations, such as developing a strange taste in your mouth or a muscular twitch under one of your eyes.

External triggers

Besides things happening within your body, a number of external things can draw your attention towards possible health problems and therefore trigger off episodes of health anxiety. For example:

- Health scares in the news
- Upcoming medical appointments
- Being in contact with people who are unwell
- Hearing about someone who has been diagnosed with an illness
- Receiving inconclusive results on a medical test
- Being told you do have a health condition
- Being away from known health-care systems (e.g., travelling overseas)

Take a moment to write down any triggers you have experienced in relation to health anxiety.

Internal triggers

External triggers

How Health Anxiety is Maintained

Unhelpful Health Related Thinking

If your unhelpful health rules or assumptions are activated by the types of triggers just mentioned, they are likely to negatively affect the way you think about sensations or variations in your body, and how you interpret health information from medical professionals or other sources. In general, people with health anxiety tend to overestimate the likelihood that they have a serious health problem and underestimate their ability to cope with such a problem. They also tend to discount other factors which suggest that things will not be as bad as they have predicted (e.g., overlook their doctor's reassurance that a serious illness is unlikely, focus on the most negative potential outcomes rather than the chances of cure or good management). As such, all health-related experiences are viewed as a 'catastrophe' or 'worst-case' scenario.

Catastrophic interpretation of bodily sensations

If you hold an unhelpful health assumption such as "All discomfort and bodily changes are a sign of serious illness", and are then faced with the trigger of experiencing pain in your joints, you may come up with catastrophic interpretations of what the pain means. You might say things like: "This could be arthritis", "I probably have bone cancer", "This problem will be the end of me", or "This could be something incurable".



Catastrophic interpretation of health related information

You may also misinterpret health information as indicating that you are at higher risk than you really are. For example, imagine that your doctor tells you that your blood test showed a low white blood cell count but that it is "...probably just due to a common cold". If you hold the unhelpful health assumption "If my doctor doesn't know exactly what the problem is, then it must be really serious" you are more likely to come up with thoughts such as "Maybe it is actually leukaemia", or "My doctor hasn't tested for really serious problems like HIV or Lupus, so there is a chance that is what I actually have".

Take a moment to write down some of the unhelpful thoughts you have experienced in regard to your health. What kinds of things are you saying to yourself about your health or about any health information you have received?

Increase in Anxiety Symptoms

As you can probably imagine, if you start having catastrophic thoughts about your bodily sensations, you are likely to be firing up your fight/flight response in reaction to this perceived threat to your health. Your fight/flight response is designed to protect you by helping you survive a battle ("fight") or to run away to save yourself ("flight") and can include the following changes:

- muscular tension, tiredness or exhaustion
- skipping, racing or pounding heart
- changes in breathing rate / breathlessness, chest pain or pressure
- dizziness, light-headedness, blurred vision, confusion, feelings of unreality and hot flushes
- numbness and tingling in your fingers and toes
- an increase in sweating
- widening of the pupils, blurred vision, spots before the eyes, a sense that the light is too bright
- a dry mouth, nausea or an upset stomach

You may notice one, some or all of these symptoms in varying degrees of intensity.

These physical alarm responses are important when facing real danger, but they can also occur when there is only a *perceived* danger. If you say things to yourself like: “This could be something incurable”, “I may have cancer”, or “My doctor may have missed something important”, it is likely that these *perceived dangers* will set off your fight/flight anxiety symptoms.

Unfortunately, people who have a tendency to notice and worry about health signs and symptoms can then also start to worry about some of these fight/flight anxiety symptoms – jumping to the conclusion that they are another sign that something really is wrong!



This can lead to a vicious cycle where real symptoms trigger catastrophic thoughts about health problems, which in turn trigger anxiety symptoms. These anxiety symptoms can then lead to more catastrophic thoughts about health problems, which trigger more anxiety symptoms... and so on. Although driven by your catastrophic thinking, you experience real physical symptoms.

Focussing on Symptoms

In Module 2, we discussed how a useful part of our fight/flight response is to focus on the thing by which we feel threatened, and also, on ways of possible escape. We also talked about how hard it can be to draw our attention away from that threatening thing. We used the example of coming across a snake in the bush from which we find it hard to look away.

Unfortunately, focussing your attention on something can sometimes amplify the intensity with which you experience that thing. Going back to our snake example, if you were to focus your attention on the snake you will become more aware of the size, colour and shape of the snake. You may also notice the sound of the snake as it moves across the ground. Overall, focussing more intensely helps you to evaluate and monitor the threat before you.

Similarly, the more you focus on your symptoms, the more aware you will become of the peculiarities of that symptom. Unfortunately, focussing on a symptom can also amplify the intensity of that symptom and, in turn, create more concern about the symptom and increase your desire to focus on the symptom.



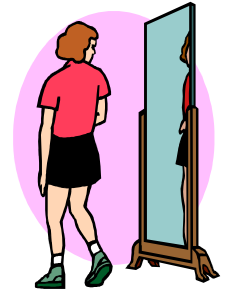
Try this exercise. Focus in on your stomach...notice all the tiny sensations you can feel...it might be tightness or gurgling or fluttering or something else...really hone in on any symptoms or sensations you notice in your stomach. Stay with this for 1 minute. Now ask yourself whether you had noticed any of these sensations before you purposely focused on your stomach? Also as the time spent focusing on your stomach dragged on, did the sensations get more or less noticeable? Usually people find they notice a whole bunch of sensations they had not previously been aware of, and that these sensations seem to grow over the minute, as they pay more and more attention to them.

Take a moment to write down any symptoms, sensations or areas of your body that you tend to focus on regularly. When you are paying attention, what do you notice most about that symptom, sensation or body area? Is it the intensity? The level of pain or discomfort? Whether it is staying the same or changing?

Checking and Reassurance Seeking Behaviours

To check on or ask for reassurance about things we are worried about is a normal human behaviour. Most people have thought to themselves “I’m not sure I locked the door properly”, then walked back and checked or even asked a companion “Did I lock the door when we left?” Usually, this will lead to us feeling less anxious, and allow us to continue on with our everyday lives.

In terms of our health, we are actually encouraged to check our bodies and seek reassurance. For example, we are often encouraged to monitor moles for any signs of change, and women are frequently encouraged to check their breast regularly. We are then encouraged to contact a medical professional if we are concerned about our health, or notice any changes in our general wellbeing. Just like the previous example of checking whether we’d locked the door, checking or obtaining reassurance about our health status will usually lead us to feel less anxious, and allow us to continue on with our everyday lives.



However, people who experience health anxiety tend to continue worrying about their health, continue to feel anxious, and therefore continue to engage in checking and reassurance seeking to try to reduce their concerns and unpleasant feelings.

People with health anxiety have reported engaging in *frequent and repeated*:

- Checking in the mirror for signs of asymmetry, areas of discolouration, or new moles or lumps
- Poking, palpating or pinching of the skin, breasts, stomach or other areas of the body
- Examination of bodily excretions (e.g., saliva, urine, faeces) for signs of blood or infection
- Measuring parts of their body (e.g., using tape measure or callipers)
- Monitoring of bodily processes (e.g., taking pulse, checking blood pressure)
- Weighing of their body or bodily excretions
- Asking family members, friends, and health care providers about their symptoms
- Researching their symptoms on the internet or in medical texts
- Posting of their symptoms on internet sites to obtain others opinions about their symptoms
- Requesting of medical tests or evaluations, and second opinions

In some cases, the efforts to check for an illness can bring about new and painful symptoms themselves. For example, when performing a breast self-examination, Sally noticed a bumpy area that she had not noticed before. Over the next two weeks, she continued to worry and began to push on and even squeeze the area to see if any of the lumps were getting any bigger. She also informed her boyfriend and mother about her concerns, getting them to also feel the lumpy area and asking them for their advice. Each day, the area became more and more tender and painful to touch, thus increasing her concern that something was seriously wrong.

Take a moment to write down any checking or reassurance seeking behaviours you have engaged in. What were you looking for? What did you find? Were there any negative consequences of the checking or reassurance behaviours?



Avoidance and Safety Behaviours

Whilst checking and reassurance seeking are designed to decrease feelings of anxiety that are already present, avoidance and safety behaviours are strategies used to try to prevent us from experiencing anxiety.

People who experience health anxiety will generally try to avoid the internal and external triggers we identified earlier in this module. To avoid internal triggers, you may avoid engaging in things that lead to changes in your physiological state. This could include: exercising, walking up stairs, drinking coffee, having sex, eating spicy foods, and drinking fizzy drinks.

To avoid external triggers, you may avoid a large range of potential people, places or situations which remind you of health issues. To name a few, this can include avoiding:

- medical professionals or check-ups
- doctor's surgeries
- watching the news or reading the newspaper
- walking past funeral homes
- writing a will
- phoning for test results
- eating foods close to the used by date
- visiting a friend who has a non-infectious disease
- using public restrooms
- watching medical dramas on TV
- visiting a relative who has recently been sick
- not reading information provided by a Doctor

Avoidance means that in the short term, there are fewer reminders of health related issues and therefore less chance of feeling worried and concerned. However, in the longer term avoidance can keep your fears going, or even make them worse.



The term “safety behaviours” refers to a more subtle form of avoidance. To use safety behaviours means that you may not outrightly avoid something, but will only approach that feared place, person or activity if certain back-up plans are in place. For example, someone who fears contracting meningococcal disease may still go out in public and even attend medical appointments, but only if they are carrying hand sanitiser and antibiotics in their bag. Similarly, someone who is fearful of having a heart attack may continue going about their daily business, but only if they are around others and are carrying a mobile phone at all times in case an ambulance needs to be called.

Engaging in safety behaviours only temporarily reduces your health worries and concerns. The next time you are confronted with a similar situation, you will feel the need to use them again and never learn that you can survive without them.

Take a moment to write down the things you might be avoiding because of your health fears. This could include certain people, places, activities, objects, or even foods. Also, are there any behaviours you engage in to increase your sense of safety in these situations?



Note: Although they could seem like opposite behaviours, you may engage in checking and avoidance at the same time. For example, you could be engaging in daily breast self-examinations, yet avoid telling others about your concerns or going to the doctor to have them check you over. Alternatively, you may engage in only checking or avoidance, or a little of each of these. The combination of checking and avoidance behaviours will vary from person to person.

Putting It All Together: Model of How Health Anxiety is Maintained

It is quite normal to experience both internal and external triggers. So how do these triggers lead to health anxiety? Remember from Module 2, if you have already experienced a number of negative health experiences, you may be more sensitive or “tuned in” than others to noticing these internal and external triggers. This in turn increases your chance of “setting off” health anxiety.

Generally speaking, when confronted with an internal or external trigger, your health rules and assumptions become activated. By “activated” we mean that they move from being dormant to being switched on like a light switch. Once activated, your health rules and assumptions can start to affect how you think, feel, and behave in response to those triggers.

If you hold flexible and realistic rules and assumptions about your health, these internal or external triggers probably won't worry you too much. For example, let's say you notice pain in your joints, plus you hold the rule “If this pain gets worse or is still there in another week, then I will get the Doctor to check it out”.

Such a rule is:

- *flexible*, in that it allows you to experience what may be normal bodily sensations, without excessive worry, checking, or medical opinion seeking, and is
- *realistic*, in that it doesn't discount the possibility that there may be a problem that could need medical attention.



However, imagine that you notice pain in your joints, plus hold the unhelpful health assumption “All discomfort and bodily changes are a sign of serious illness”. How might you then respond to that pain in your joint? What might you start to think about that pain? How would you be feeling each time you thought about that joint pain? How would you rate your chance of a good outcome should you even visit the doctor?

All-in-all, when you experience a combination of unhelpful health rules or assumptions plus internal or external triggers that draw your attention to health related issues, you are at increased risk for experiencing health anxiety. You are more likely to interpret bodily sensations or changes as a sign of serious illness, to misinterpret health related information, and to set off more physiological sensations each time you worry.



You may then engage in unhelpful efforts to control your anxiety or reduce your risk of disease. You may focus on your symptoms in an effort to monitor and evaluate any potential health threats. You may check or seek reassurance to increase your sense of certainty over your health status. You may also engage in avoidance or safety behaviours to stop your health anxiety from being triggered in the first place.

In the short term, these behaviours may provide a temporary sense of relief or control over your health concerns. However in the long term there can be negative consequences. For example, focusing on your symptoms can enhance the intensity of those symptoms. Checking behaviours may lead to tenderness or inflammation. Seeking and then being given medical tests may reinforce your belief that something is wrong. Researching your symptoms can alert you to catastrophic yet unlikely explanations for your symptoms. All of these behaviours create more worry and therefore keep your health anxiety going.

Also, avoiding or using safety behaviours can limit your ability to learn anything new about your health. For example,

- If you don't go to the doctor for a check-up, you don't find out whether you do or do not have a health problem. You may therefore continue to worry about your health.
- If you avoid people or places that you believe may make you sick, you never get to find out if this really does occur. So in the longer term you feel that you must continue to avoid it.

The following case illustrates how this can develop in to a vicious cycle of anxiety.

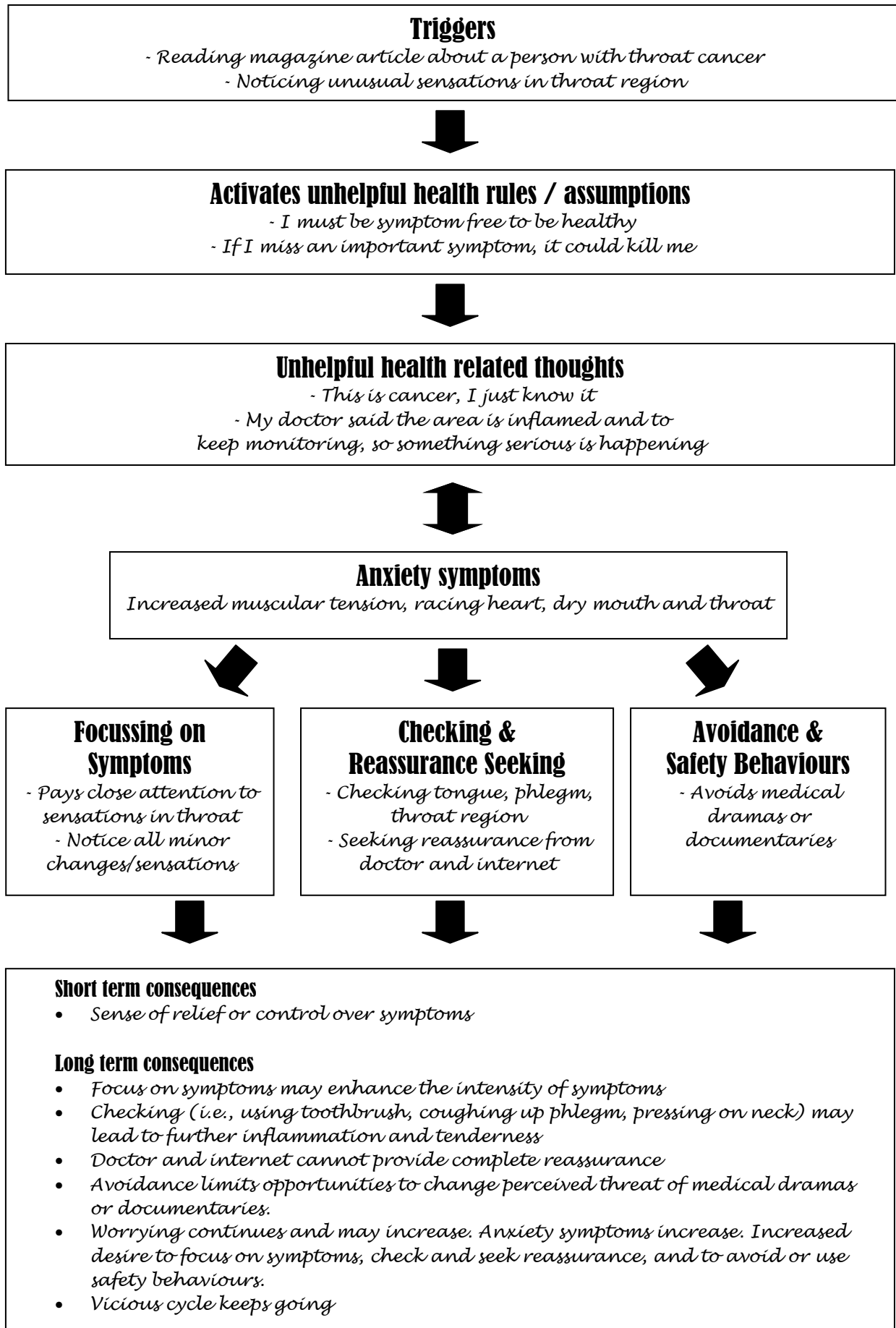
Sarah was a 30yo woman who continued to visit her doctor complaining of a sore throat. Sarah had read a magazine article about a person who had developed throat cancer despite never being a smoker. Sarah had worried ever since that she may develop or even already have this problem, and had begun to notice some unusual sensations in her throat region (i.e., tightness, a dry throat). On multiple occasions her doctor informed her that her throat “looked inflamed” but that there were no current signs of actual cancer. Her doctor told her not to worry about the soreness but rather to come back and see him if the symptoms got worse.

Unhappy with her doctor’s response, Sarah began engaging in daily forced coughing behaviours to try to “bring up” as much phlegm as possible so that she could check it for signs of blood or infection. She would sometimes use her toothbrush to push on the back of her tongue so that she could check for areas of tenderness, and also engaged in regular palpating of her neck, checking it for lumps and areas of tenderness. Sarah had difficulty concentrating and performing her job as she continuously focussed on the unpleasant sensations and spent time researching her symptoms and potential treatments on the internet. Sarah began to switch off the television whenever medical dramas or documentaries came on the television, stating that she didn’t need to be reminded of what the future may hold.

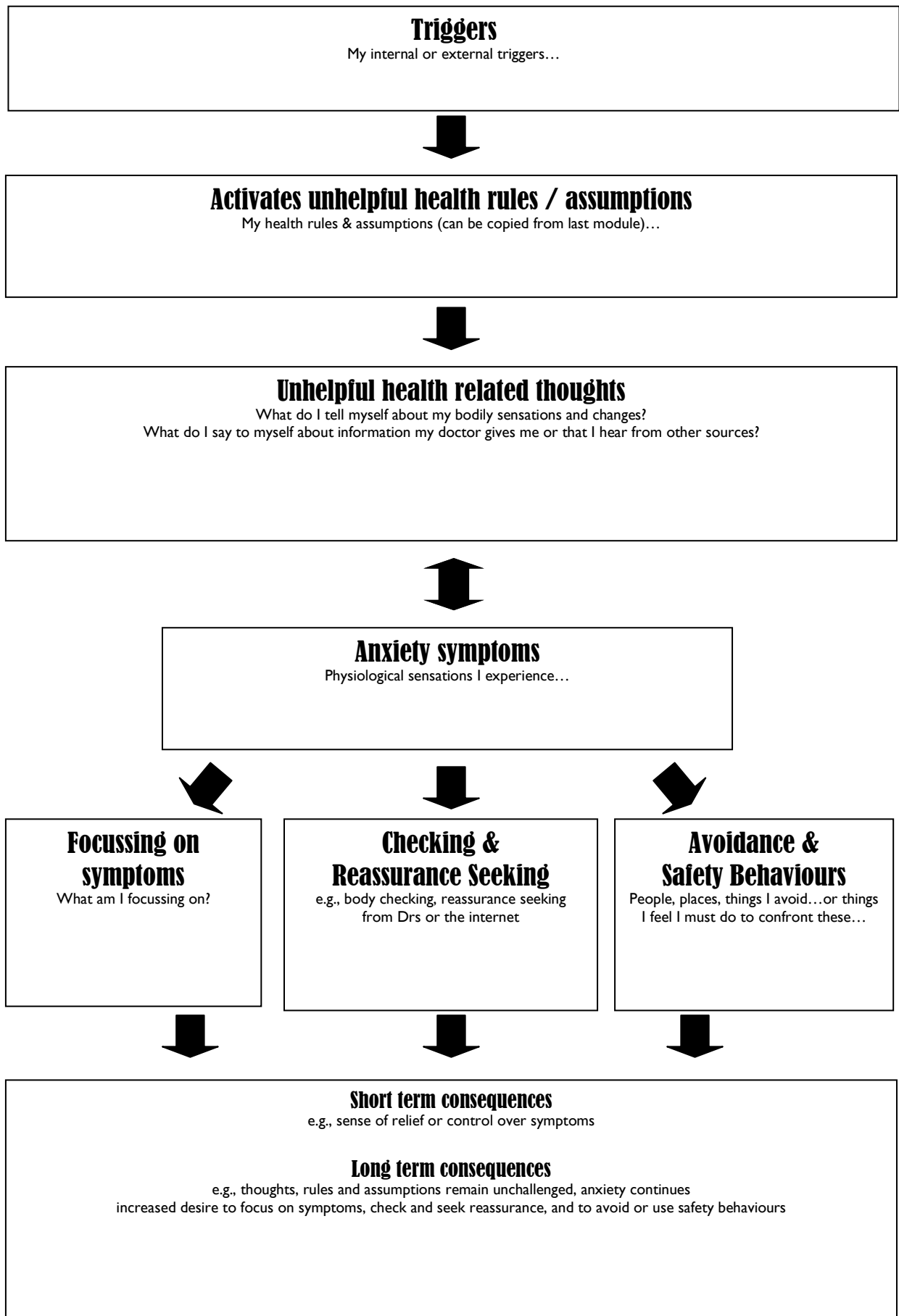
On the following page we have collated this information into a model, so that it is easier to see how Sarah’s health anxiety is being triggered and then maintained.

As you can see, Sarah is caught in a vicious cycle of worrying about her health, setting off more physiological symptoms (including anxiety itself), and engaging in efforts to control her worry and symptoms which in the long term can keep the problem going. On the following page, there is a worksheet for you to collate your own example.

How Sarah's Health Anxiety is Maintained



How My Health Anxiety is Maintained



More Good News...

At first, it may look overwhelming to see how your efforts to try to control or reduce your worrying and symptoms can actually lead to them increasing. However, being able to understand what is keeping health anxiety going on a day-to-day basis lets you see where you can start to make some changes to break this vicious cycle.

The remainder of these modules will cover a range of cognitive and behavioural strategies aimed at gradually breaking down the unhelpful thoughts, behaviours, and rules & assumptions that can keep this cycle going.

Looking at the model, you may wonder why we don't start at challenging the unhelpful rules and assumptions first. The reason we leave these until later is that they can be somewhat harder to shift than your unhelpful thoughts and behaviours (after all, these rules and assumptions may have been there for quite some time). We therefore come back to these towards the end of the modules once you have started to "wear down" the old maintaining cycle. We encourage you to commit to working through the modules, in order, and completing all of the exercises and worksheets, as this will bring you the most benefit.

Module Summary

- Health anxiety can be triggered by a range of internal or external triggers
- It is quite normal to experience these internal and external triggers. However, when they are paired with unhelpful health rules or assumptions, they can lead to:
 - negative health related thinking
 - increased anxiety symptoms
 - a narrowing of attention on to the feared symptoms
 - checking and reassurance seeking behaviours, and
 - avoidance and safety behaviours
- In the short term, these behaviours may provide a sense of relief or control over symptoms
- In the long term, these behaviours may lead to:
 - increased focussing on symptoms
 - more worry and concern about symptoms
 - more anxiety symptoms
 - tenderness or pain in the area being checked
 - an increased desire to check and seek opinions
 - increased use of avoidance and safety behaviours
- Understanding what keeps our health anxiety going is the first step towards breaking this vicious cycle.



Coming up next ...

In the next module, you will learn how to start decreasing your focus on your health symptoms and worries.

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.

Abramowitz, J., Taylor, S., & McKay, D. (2010). Hypochondriasis and severe health anxiety. In McKay, D., Abramowitz, J., S., & Taylor, S. (Eds.). *Cognitive-behavior therapy: Turning failure into success* (pp. 327-346). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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Helping Health Anxiety

Module 4

Reducing Your Focus on Health Symptoms and Worries

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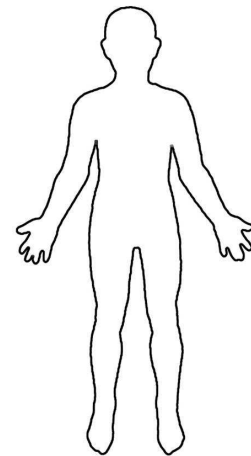
Introduction

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.



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.

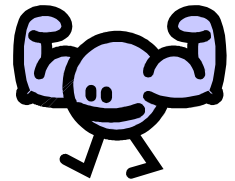
Positive belief to be evaluated: _____ How much do you believe this now (0% = not at all, 100% = completely): _____%
What is the goal of focusing your attention in this way? Does focusing your attention in this way truly reach your goal? How <i>exactly</i> does it help and protect you? If you were diagnosed with a health problem tomorrow, how has focusing on symptoms and worries truly prepared you?
Are there any negative consequences to focusing your attention in this way? 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?
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?
What conclusions can you make from this?
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.

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: _____
Before starting the attention workout, where do I notice my attention is focussed? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-focussed attention (including thoughts, bothersome symptoms/sensations): _____ % • Task-focussed attention (the task I was actually engaged with): _____ % <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 5px;"> 100 % </div>
During the attention workout, anchor my attention back to the task at hand by focussing on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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? • 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? • Hearing: What sounds do I notice? What kinds of noises are associated with the task? • Smell: What smells do I notice? Do they change during the task? How many smells are there? • Taste: What flavours do I notice? Do they change during the task? What is the quality of the flavours? <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>
Having completed the attention workout, where did I notice my attention was focussed during the workout? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-focussed attention (including thoughts, bothersome symptoms/sensations): _____ % • Task-focussed attention (the task I was actually engaged with): _____ % <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 5px;"> 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 28th, 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 28th, 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?

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.

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