

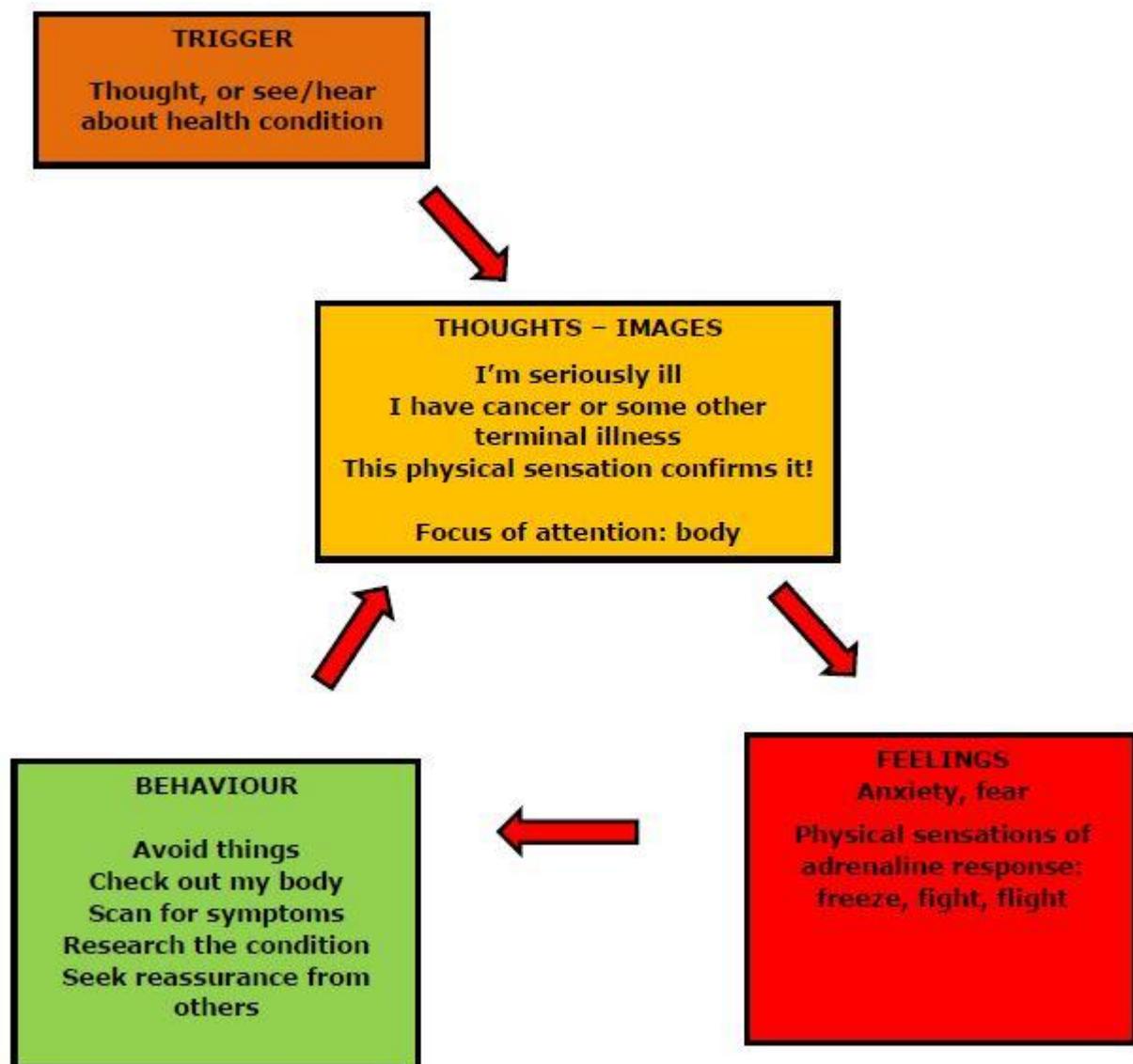
Health Anxiety

Individuals with Health Anxiety have an obsessive preoccupation with being seriously ill. If someone believes they have a serious illness, such as cancer or a brain tumour, then any innocent or normal physical sensation can be seen as a symptom of that serious illness, and serves to confirm that they 'MUST' be seriously ill.

This in turn, causes them to check for other symptoms, read up and find out more about the illness, focus their attention on their body sensations, and continually scan their body for sensations or more symptoms.

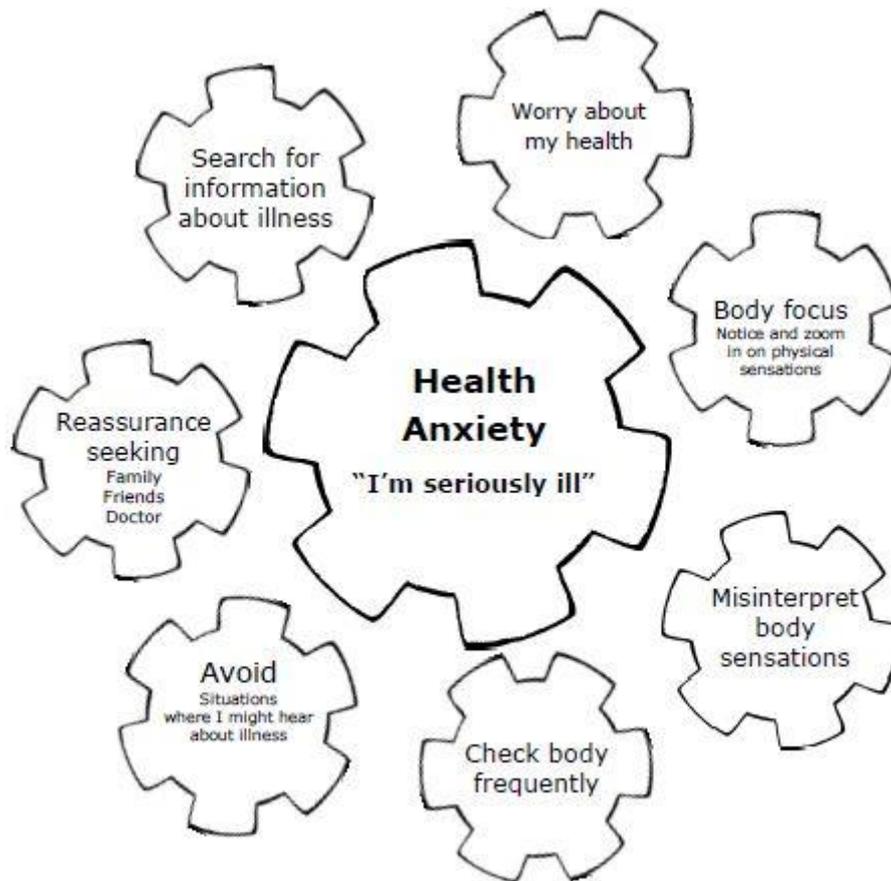
Cognitive Behaviour Therapy focuses on challenging the unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, and gradually changing our behaviours (the checking, reassurance seeking, avoidance etc). We therefore discover that it is anxiety and worry about our health that makes us feel the way we do, rather than having a serious illness.

Example of a vicious cycle of Health Anxiety



Self Help for Health Anxiety

To break the vicious cycle of health anxiety, we need to action each "cog" of the Health Anxiety machinery, by changing the way we think, and changing what we do.



Complete this [Vicious Cycle & Alternatives](#) worksheet

Read the [Anxiety](#) page

Read about how [Adrenaline](#) (the body's alarm system) affects us

THINKING DIFFERENTLY: Focus of attention

Learn about how a Health Anxiety focus of attention works by reading [The Super Scanner: Health Anxiety](#)

When we focus on one particular part of our body for a while, we start to notice different sensations. Try thinking about a part of your foot or throat (swallow) right now, and really focus on noticing any feelings there. What do you notice? You are probably noticing sensations that you hadn't noticed before. That is what happens with our focus of attention in health anxiety. The more we think about a part of our body, the more we notice - which then triggers worrying thoughts about our health.

We can learn to notice where our focus of attention is, and learn to take more control with attention exercises or learning mindfulness skills.

Mindful Breathing - practise this effective and simple skill at least twice daily

Mindfulness & mindful activity

You could include a set time of doing a mundane activity with your full attention, initially for 3 minutes twice a day, then gradually increase. For example, when doing the washing up, you can practise using your senses to shift your focus and notice:

- the temperature of the water and how it feels on your skin
- the texture of the bubbles
- the sound of the bubbles as they softly pop continuously
- the sound of the water as you move the crockery about
- the smoothness of the crockery
- the texture of the sponge
- the smell of the washing liquid etc.



The more we practice, perhaps the more, initially at least, we will notice those thoughts intruding, and that's ok. The only aim of mindful activity is to continually bring our attention back to the activity, noticing those sensations, from outside and within us.

See the mindfulness handout for more examples

THINKING DIFFERENTLY: Challenging the worrying thoughts

- Read **About Automatic Thoughts**
- Read **Fact or Opinion**



Thoughts are not facts, they are just thoughts and we don't have to believe everything we think! The problem is not that we are seriously ill, the problem is that we THINK we are seriously ill. That's a big difference! So if we are not seriously ill, but just think we are, then constantly worrying and thinking about our health isn't going to be helpful at all - but it will have an adverse affect on us. Thinking we're ill when we're not, is making us more ill.

Do you know for certain that you have this serious illness?

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

We can look for evidence - facts - that tell us we are not seriously ill, so that when the thoughts about being ill come back, we can be better prepared and challenge them. The more we challenge them, the weaker and less powerful the thoughts become.

Learn to challenge the distorted thinking by using the **Health Anxiety Thought Record Sheet**

You might also **Postpone your worry or set Worry Free Time**

You might notice an immediate reduction in your anxiety, but it can sometimes take a few weeks before you start to notice a difference - after all, you've been thinking this way for a long time, and it can take a while to change a long-term habit. Stick with it!

Learn and use STOPP skill



DOING DIFFERENTLY

Checking - When we worry about our health, we notice that part of our body, and we check it - by looking, by feeling, or by thinking about it. We do this lots of times, but all it does is keep us thinking about it, and increase our worrying thoughts, and therefore our anxiety - which stimulates adrenaline, which will make us feel worse.

So we need to reduce the checking. You can aim to do this over a period of several days. Write down how many times you check your body every day, and reduce it every day - and then you will start to notice that you worry less. You might agree to check just once a day - thereafter tell yourself that you have checked already and don't need to check again (because it's extremely unlikely to have changed in that short period).

Information seeking - You can use the same reducing approach to looking up information (internet, books etc) about the health problem. In seeking more information, you will worry more and feel more anxious, so we need to reduce it in the same way as we reduce the checking behaviour.



Avoidance - We avoid certain situations in case it starts us worrying about our health, and this can impact greatly on our everyday lives. Many people avoid certain television programmes, or hospitals, or conversations about health etc. Use the **Avoidance Worksheet** to help you identify and work out a plan to help you face your fears and reduce the avoidance.

Reassurance seeking - we might repeatedly ask our family and friends, or visit our doctor often, in order to hear the words "everything is ok - there's nothing wrong". This seems helpful....for a short while...until the worrying thoughts come back again, then we start all over again. So the reassurance seeking helps to keep the anxiety going, in the long term.

Aim to reduce visiting your doctor or asking others for reassurance. If you usually ask your partner 30 times a day, then aim to reduce over the period of a few days, as much as you can. You might write down the number of times you ask, because writing it down helps us notice, and also helps us think twice about doing it! You can also notice your success at reducing the reassurance over time.

Whilst your doctor can do tests and tell you that you don't have a particular illness, we have to accept that, we can never be certain that you will never have that or another serious illness. The chance is a lot smaller than we imagine, and perhaps there are things we can do to reduce the risk.

Is there anything I can do that will help me feel healthier? (e.g. stop smoking, change my diet, exercise more) If so, then do it!

Of course, there are still going to be times when you should visit your doctor. You could discuss this with your doctor and agree what is appropriate. Generally, over-the-counter medications suggest visiting your GP if your symptoms are still there after a week. You might agree to extend this to two weeks. However, you must seek medical attention if you have a high temperature, severe pain or your physical condition worsens.

Use STOPP skill to incorporate all these strategies

STOP - just pause for a moment

Take a breath - one slow deep breath

Observe - there's that health worry again. My body and mind is reacting to that body sensation and I feel anxious.

Pull back - this is just the health anxiety - my thoughts are reacting to the super scanner. Don't believe everything you think! Let's stick with the facts - these thoughts are just opinions (**Fact or Opinion**). I don't have to react right now. There's another explanation for this...(normal body sensation etc)

Practise / Proceed - What can I do right now? I don't need to check or seek reassurance. I can use these strategies:

- **Health Anxiety Thought Record Sheet**
- **Postpone your worry or set Worry Free Time**
- **Mindful Breathing**
- **Avoidance Worksheet**

Where can I put my focus of attention right now? (**Mindfulness & mindful activity**). What else can I do that would help me tolerate these feelings without reacting to them?

