ALWAYS WORRIED ABOUT

YOUR HEALTH?

IF YOU ARE IN NEED OF SOME SUPPORT, THIS SELF-HELP BOOK CAN HELP YOU COPE BETTER WITH HEALTH ANXIETY.

A BETTER YOU, FOR A BRIGHTER TOMORROW



HEALTH ANXIETY SELF-HELP BOOKLET

This self-help booklet is split into 6 sections aimed at helping you to gain a better understanding of health anxiety and how it affects you, what keeps it going and effective ways to control and manage it.

It aims to help you to deal with your health related anxiety using techniques from a well-established psychological treatment known as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

CONTENTS

· Wellbeing resources

Section 1: · What is health anxiety?	3 - 10
Section 2: · Health anxiety and the body	11 - 18
Section 3: · Health anxiety and thinking	19 - 20
Section 4: · Health anxiety and behaviour	27 - 34
Section 5: · Review	35 - 30
Section 6:	37

There are various exercises throughout the booklet to help you understand your anxiety and to help you learn ways of managing it. Like any new skill, it may take a bit of time and practice before you notice any changes in the way you feel.

The exercises in this booklet are identified by 'Stop & Think'. To gain the most from these, it is important that you take some time to think about the guestions asked, and to complete the exercises.

It may be that it takes several readings of it before you start to write things down. That's okay, just take your time. It is helpful to read each section thoroughly before moving on to the next.

Praise yourself for every step you take.





SECTION 1: WHAT IS HEALTH ANXIETY?

Anxiety arises at times when we think something bad may or will happen. People who constantly worry, or become excessively concerned, that something bad may or will happen with their health, therefore, may suffer from health anxiety.

Although we all worry about our health from time to time it can become a problem if it causes you serious distress and affects your ability to function properly. Health anxiety can affect people who are 'healthy' and have no medical reason to worry about their health, people who experience unexplained physical symptoms, as well as those people who have an existing or diagnosed medical condition.

Whether or not you are 'healthy', experience unexplained physical symptoms or have a diagnosed medical condition, the important thing is how you are responding to, and coping with, your symptoms or condition. If you respond to health issues or symptoms by excessively worrying and checking for symptoms, seeking reassurance and comfort, and/or avoiding doing things, then health anxiety may be a problem.

Below are the thoughts of some people who suffer from health anxiety:

Sally is 45 years old and has a diagnosis of lupus.

"I was diagnosed with lupus a few years ago and since then I have constantly worried about my health. I am scared about how this condition will affect me in the future and worry that the aches and pains I currently experience will get worse. If they do, how will I cope? I won't be able to do anything again. I'll be a shadow of the person I used to be. It's constantly on my mind. I keep checking how I am every day..."

James 25, has a family history of heart problems.

"Grandad died of a heart attack when I was five. My uncle was lucky to survive a heart attack two years ago. It will definitely happen to me. Even though I get regular check-ups at my doctor's and he tells me that I am OK, I can't stop worrying and looking out for signs that I might be about to have a heart attack. If I feel the slightest little pain or tingle in my chest I stop what I'm doing and take a rest. I have stopped going out just in case anything happens and I find it a struggle to concentrate on anything other than my health..."

Helen is 33 years old and is in good health

"I suppose I've never had any illnesses or any real reason to worry about my health but I find that I often do. The news is full of stories about people who have found out they are ill and had no idea until a chance visit to their doctor. I am very aware of any little tingles or pains in my body and worry that it could be a sign of something really serious. Even a headache can leave me worrying that I have a brain tumour. I tend to look up my symptoms on the internet which can leave me feeling worse. I also find that I constantly seek reassurance from my family that I'll be OK. I definitely make more check-up appointments at my doctors than I would like. It's beginning to get me down..."

WHY ME?

There are many reasons why people may worry about their health. It may be that you are going through a particularly stressful period in your life. It may be that a friend or loved one has recently died, become ill, or been diagnosed with a medical condition. It may be that you have had a health scare yourself, or have been diagnosed with a medical condition. Information about illness through the media may also have played a role in the development of your health anxiety. It could be that a family member worried about your health when you were younger. Whatever it is that has triggered your health anxiety, it is important to start to take control of it and take steps to deal with it in a better way.





What do you think has triggered your health anxiety?

HOW HEALTH ANXIETY AFFECTS US

Health anxiety can affect us in four main ways and each can influence the others.

It affects our bodies

Many people are first aware of the physical signs of anxiety such as rapid heart-beat, breathlessness, sweating, muscular tension, headaches, butterflies in your stomach, or dizziness. When you are anxious about your health, you may interpret these symptoms for a medical condition which may then lead you to feel more anxious and so a vicious cycle develops.

It affects how we think

When you feel anxious about your health, you may find that you worry excessively and that your thoughts are concerned with what might happen. Typically, someone who is anxious about their health might think:

"It happened to my granddad, it will happen to me."

"I won't be able to cope."

"What if I have a heart attack?"

"I have had new symptoms since visiting the doctor, it must be more serious than I thought."

"I might die if I don't do something."

It affects how we feel

If we are regularly worried about our health we may begin to feel anxious, sad, irritable, frustrated, fed up and tired.

It affects how we behave

Health anxiety can affect our behaviours. It might cause us to seek reassurance and comfort that everything is okay. This may be from family, friends, colleagues, or the doctor. We may also begin to check our body for symptoms and become more aware of physical sensations in our body. We may look up symptoms and conditions on the internet, and begin to notice such symptoms or conditions in ourselves. We may even begin to behave as though we are ill, which might lead us to stop doing certain activities.



STOP & THINK

To check out whether you may be suffering from health anxiety, look at the list of symptoms below and place a tick next to those symptoms you experience regularly.

How do	you feel?
--------	-----------

non ao you reen	
Anxious, nervous, worried, frightened	Tense, stressed, on edge, uneasy, unsettled
Feeling of dread	Feeling tired or unwell
Panicky	
What happens to your body?	
Strange' sensations in	Dizzy or light headed
various parts of body	☐ Having to go to the
Bodily aches	toilet frequently
Muscle tension	Headaches
Changes in breathing	Heart racing
Tingling or numbness in toes, fingers or arms	☐ Nausea, stomach churning, 'butterflies'
Chest pain or tightness	Sweating

How do you think?	
Constantly worrying about health	Thinking that the doctor may be able to help
Imagining the worst case scenario and dwelling on it	Thinking that if you don't worry, something bad will happen
Thinking about different illnesses and symptoms	Win Happen Worrying that the doctor
☐ Thinking that because a	has missed something
family member or friend had an illness or health scare it will happen to you	Believe that unless you focus on your health you will miss signs of a
Focusing on parts of your	serious illness
body and symptoms	Believe that you may have a serious illness but you do not want to think about it
What do you do?	
Make frequent appointments with your doctor	Avoid any information related to health or illness e.g. programmes
Seek reassurance from	on television
family and friends about your symptoms	Seek out information on health or illness and check for
Frequently check your body for symptoms	those symptoms (internet, television, books etc.)
Focus on one area of your	Act as though you are ill e.g.

If you recognise that you are regularly experiencing some or all of these symptoms, then it is possible that you are suffering from health anxiety.

body for changing sensations

avoid exertion or exercise.

resting, staving at home

WHEN IS HEALTH ANXIETY A PROBLEM?

We all worry about our health at some point in our lives. Indeed, concern about our health can be positive if it leads us to improve our lifestyle, for example eating healthier or giving up smoking. However, concerns about our health can get 'out of control' when they occur excessively and repeatedly and/or when they persist despite negative test results and/or reassurance from your doctor. Health concerns may also be problematic if they lead to unhelpful behaviours such as excessive checking, reassurance seeking (from family, friends, and/or doctor) or avoidance (e.g. of check-ups, doctor's appointments). If concerns about your health cause you significant distress and negatively affect normal day-to-day life, then health anxiety may be a problem for you.

WHAT KEEPS HEALTH ANXIETY GOING?

Anxiety develops like a habit – our thoughts and behaviours become natural and automatic, which can keep the anxiety going. As we have already discussed, health anxiety can affect our body, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours; these areas are all tied to each other and can influence each other creating a 'vicious cycle'.

LET'S LOOK AT AN EXAMPLE TO ILLUSTRATE.

Imagine you are at work and feel a pain in your chest. You may begin to **think** that something serious is wrong with your heart and that you are about to have a heart attack. This would then naturally cause you to **feel** anxious, frightened and panicky. So, what you think has affected how you feel. You may begin to notice other changes in your **body**, such as your heart racing and feeling sick. You may then decide to leave work early and make an emergency appointment with your doctor (**behaviour**).

The following diagram links these areas together to make sense of what happens when we have strong feelings of anxiety.





This diagram shows us that what we think about a situation affects how we feel physically and emotionally, and changes what we do. This 'vicious cycle of health anxiety' can keep the problem going. This self-help booklet aims to help you to weaken the vicious cycle by helping you to manage better the unhelpful thoughts and behaviours that keep it going.

WHAT CAN I DO TO GET BETTER?

There are several useful ways to help people manage anxiety problems. The first step is recognising you have a problem, and being willing to make some changes in your life.

Self-help. A good first option is using self-help materials – like this booklet. This way you learn about problems you might be facing and how to deal with them. In this booklet we will look at three areas of anxiety – the body, thoughts and behaviour – and learn some skills to help you break the loop of anxiety and tackle your difficulties.

Medication. Several types of medication are available to treat anxiety. Your GP will be able to discuss these with you. You can also find out a lot about medication from leaflets, websites and phone lines which are listed at the back of this booklet.

Psychological (talking) therapies. The most widely used and best researched type of therapy for anxiety is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). CBT aims to help identify, unravel and change the unhelpful thinking and behaviour which can keep anxiety going.

SUMMARY

- Worrying about your health is quite normal from time to time.
- Continuous concern about your health, however, can get in the way of normal day-to-day life and this is when it becomes problematic.

Anxiety about our health can affect us in four main ways which are all linked:

- The way our body works
- The way we feel
- The way we think
- The way we behave

People with health anxiety often:

- Have unrealistic worrying thoughts and beliefs about health
- Seek comfort and reassurance from others
- Frequently check their body for symptoms
- Avoid information about health or seek out information about health
- Behave as though they are ill
- Anxiety develops like a habit the thinking and the behaviour become natural and automatic, therefore it can become difficult to manage.
- There are several types of help available; self-help booklets, medication, and psychological treatments.





E.g. Imagine you are walking through the woods and come face to face with a bear. Your heart starts beating fast, your muscles tense, you are intensely alert. For a split second, you are paralysed with fear. Then you make a decision. You decide either to defend yourself or run. This is called the 'fight or flight' response.

In the same way, when we worry about our health or think that there may be a threat to our health in some way, our 'fight or flight' response is triggered. Some of the common physical sensations that we experience when our 'fight or flight' response is triggered are:

Our heart beats faster: To allow your heart to take blood where it is most needed i.e. legs to run faster. You are not having a heart attack – this is a normal response to anxiety.

Our breathing quickens and becomes shallow: Helps oxygen to be carried around your lungs, arms and legs via bloodstream. Side effects may be chest pain, breathlessness, choking feeling, blurred vision. Although you may feel dizzy you will not faint. To faint your blood pressure has to drop and, when we are anxious, because our hearts beat faster, our blood pressure is temporarily raised.

Our muscles tense: This happens to make sure we can stand and fight or run away, ready for some form of action

Some other common physical symptoms of anxiety are listed in the box on the next page.



Look at the table of physical sensations. Tick the sensations you have experienced and how often they occur.

PHYSICAL SENSATIONS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER
SHORTNESS OF BREATH			
FAST OR IRREGULAR HEARTBEAT			
MUSCLE TENSION			
SHAKING OR TREMBLING			
EXCESSIVE SWEATING			
FEELING SICK			
FEELING DIZZY OR UNSTEADY			
FEELING HOT OR BLUSHING			
BUTTERFLIES IN THE STOMACH			
CAN'T CONCENTRATE			
DRY MOUTH; FEELING OF CHOKING			
TINGLING; PINS AND NEEDLES			
PAINS OR TIGHTNESS IN THE CHEST			
HEADACHES; BLURRED VISION			
FEELINGS OF UNREALITY			

The 'fight or flight' response is a normal and helpful response when we are faced with immediate physical danger or threat. It is unhelpful however, when it is switched on if the threat is low or happens in a situation when there is no 'real' threat.

It is important to remember that the physical sensations of anxiety are **not harmful**.

When people are anxious about their health they can often mistake the physical sensations of anxiety to be a sign of serious illness. This can make the symptoms worse and so a 'vicious cycle' develops.

Remember the example earlier when you were at work and felt a pain in your chest? If you interpret this pain as sign that you are about to have a heart attack, you may start to experience the physical sensations of anxiety. These physical sensations of anxiety may then make you feel more anxious and make you worry more about your health and so the 'vicious cycle' continues.



PANIC ATTACKS

Panic attacks are very sudden periods of intense anxiety and can cause extreme discomfort. These symptoms are a heightened experience of the feelings caused by anxiety. Panic attacks are very common. If you suffer from health anxiety then you will be more prone to panic attacks than someone who does not. One of the common fears in panic is that you are having a heart attack.

The table on the next page outlines the differences in symptoms between a panic attack and a heart attack.



	HEART ATTACK	PANIC ATTACK	
Pain	May or may not be present. If present, you may have a crushing feeling (like someone standing on your chest)	Any pain is usually described as 'sharp'	
	This pain is usually felt in the centre of the your chest and may extend to the left arm, neck and back	The pain tends to be felt over the heart	
made worse by breathing or by pressing on the chest		Pain is usually made worse by breathing in and out and pressing on the centre of the chest	
	Pain, if present, is usually persistent and lasts longer than 5-10 minutes	Pain usually disappears within about 5-10 minutes	
Tingling	Tingling, if present, is usually in the left arm	Tingling is usually present all over the body	
Vomiting	Common	You may feel sick but vomiting is less common	
Breathing	A heart attack does not cause you to breathe more quickly or too quickly (hyper- ventilation). Panic does. With a heart attack, you may feel a little short of breath	Breathing too quickly or too deeply (hyperventilation) is a very common panic response which comes before the panic attack	

Adapted from the World Health Organisation (WHO) Guide to Mental Health in Primary Care (2000). Royal Society of Medicine Press.

MANAGING THE PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

There are some techniques you can learn to help gain control over the physical symptoms of anxiety. Controlling your breathing and relaxation are the most effective.

Breathing

One of the most common symptoms of anxiety is hyperventilation or over-breathing – breathing too fast and taking in more oxygen than you need. This can cause tightness in the chest and lots of other unpleasant sensations like feeling faint. It is important to remember that it is very unlikely that you will faint. Fainting is caused by a drop in blood pressure, whereas anxiety causes blood pressure to rise.

Breathing is one of the easiest physical sensations to control by yourself. Try controlling your breathing following the instructions on the next page.



STOP & THINK

Controlling your breathing

Slow your breathing down to a slow easy pace

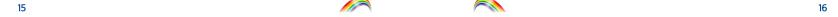
Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach

- Repeat a helpful word to yourself like 'relax' or 'calm'
- Breathe in through your nose counting 1...2...3 slowly (notice that when you breathe in, your stomach should move out slightly)
- Breathe out through your mouth or nose (which ever works best for you) counting 1...2...3 slowly (notice that when you breathe out your stomach should move in slightly)
- Aim to do this for at least 5 minutes.
- Be careful not to tense up or gulp air to do this; keep your muscles soft and your whole body relaxed
- Practise calming your breathing many times before using it to control the symptoms of anxiety you may find it takes a number of attempts before you are able to breathe calmly when you feel panicky
- It is a good idea to practise this technique when you do not feel anxious, so that you can use it easily when you do experience anxiety

Relaxation

Relaxation is a very useful way of coping with the physical symptoms of anxiety. When someone has been anxious for a long time they are often unaware of the tension in their muscles, or the knot in their stomach, which are a result of the body's reaction to stress.

When we are stressed or anxious, the muscles in our bodies tense up and this can cause uncomfortable bodily feelings like headaches, backaches, or tightness in the chest. The aches and pains of tension can cause mental worry, making us even more anxious and tense. People who are anxious and tense are often tired.



WHY IS RELAXATION HELPFUL?

- Relaxing slows down the body.
- If we learn to turn on the symptoms of relaxation we can turn off the symptoms of being highly strung and tense. You can't experience both at the same time.
- With practice you can control the physical sensations associated with anxiety.
- When you have learned to relax it can make a noticeable difference to your mood and your energy, not just when you are feeling tense but at other times too.

You might like to:

- Relax your muscles and avoid tightening and stiffening up
- Avoid fidgeting
- Keep concentration on your surroundings the 'here and now'
- Stay calm and don't rush

If you do these things, you should find yourself slowly calming down.

Talking to yourself in a positive way can also be helpful. It might help to close your eyes briefly, and just slow down, and think:

"Relax, I can deal with this."

"Keep calm, it will pass."

There are many other forms of relaxation you can try. One of the easiest methods is 'Progressive Muscular Relaxation' and this basically involves tensing and relaxing all the major muscle groups in the body. If you are interested in learning more about this technique, you can call Wellbeing on 0141 232 2555 and request our relaxation CD which will be send out to you. Alternatively, you can download this from our website at www.wellbeing-services.org.uk





SECTION 3: HEALTH ANXIETY AND THINKING

Although we can all experience worrying thoughts about our health from time to time, we can usually cope with those worries without letting them get in the way of our daily lives.

People who experience health anxiety, on the other hand, often experience anxious or unhelpful thoughts a lot of the time which can become a problem. Although each person's situation is different, many people with health anxiety often share the same basic fears, e.g. about having a serious illness, dying, and the impact that this will have on loved ones.

The thoughts we have about ourselves and/or our situation can play a major role in increasing or reducing our anxiety. Unhelpful thoughts can make us feel physically anxious (racing heart, feeling sick, knotted stomach) which can then lead us to worry more about our health.

WHAT ARE UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS?

Unhelpful, worrying thoughts have certain features:

- They are automatic and seem to come from nowhere
- They seem reasonable at the time, and often you accept them without question
- · They are hard to stop.
- They are the kind of thoughts that, if they were true, would make most people feel anxious

Unhelpful thoughts can take many different forms: What you say to yourself: "My family has a history of heart problems...! will definitely have a heart attack."

Images in your head: Seeing yourself having a heart attack, picture in your head of your family around your hospital bed

Memorles: Remembering an image from the day when your dad had a heart attack

UNHELPFUL THINKING STYLES

When we worry, the thoughts we have are of a certain type. They tend to focus on the likelihood that something bad will happen and underestimate our ability to cope with it. Most of the unhelpful, worrying thoughts that we have fall into some common categories which we call unhelpful thinking styles as outlined below.

Jumping to Conclusions

We jump to conclusions when we assume that we know what someone else is thinking (mind reading) and when we make predictions about what is going to happen in the future (predictive thinking). E.g.

"If the doctor sent me for tests, he must be really worried"

"A headache as bad as this must be something serious"

"The condition I have just now will only get worse and I will never be able to cope with it"



Catastrophising

Catastrophising occurs when we 'blow things out of proportion' and we view the situation as terrible, disastrous, horrible, dreadful, even though the reality is that the problem itself is quite small. E.g.

"I've been diagnosed with lupus, I won't be able to do anything that I used to do...I will be a shadow of my former self"

"If I am ill, I will die and my children will have no one to look after them"

All or nothing thinking

Believing that someone or something can only be good or bad, or right or wrong, rather than anything in between. E.g.

"If I have any symptoms then there must be something seriously wrong with me"

"I must have all possible tests carried out or something will be missed"

Emotional Reasoning

Emotional reasoning is when we base our view of a situation or ourselves on the way we are feeling. E.g.

"I feel that something is wrong with my health so there must be something wrong"

"This headache must be caused by a serious illness"

Overgeneralisation

When we overgeneralise, we take one experience in the past or present and impose it on all current or future situations. E.g.

"My gran had frequent headaches and died of a brain tumour, therefore if I get headaches I will die too"

"Everyone who gets that type of illness always deteriorates quickly"

IDENTIFYING UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

When you feel anxious about your health, take time to unravel and examine what is going through your mind. Often it is hard to do this as so many thoughts go through your mind all the time and can become muddled up. Try asking yourself "What are my worries about my health?" "What do I fear will happen?"

You can train yourself to notice your thoughts. One way of doing this is to use a thought diary.

Thought diary

Thought diaries can provide a way of recording your thoughts, identifying unhelpful worrying thoughts, and becoming more aware of them. When learning a new skill, it's useful to go back to basics. Writing it down helps!

The table below gives an example of a thought diary and how to complete it.



STOP & THINK

Thought Diary

Date/time: When you had the worrying thought

Situation: The place where you had the worrying thought. You may also want to note who was with you, anything that was happening at the time and what was said.

Mood: How you felt at the time, for example did you feel anxious, relaxed, or angry?

Thought: Write down the worrying thought. What was going through your mind at that time?

How much do I believe the worrying thought? On a scale of 0-10, rate how much you believe the worrying thought (0=not at all, 10=completely believe)

Here is Sam's diary

Date/ time	Situation	Mood	Worrying Thought	Belief Rating
20 March 11am	At computer typing report for work – have a headache	Anxious	I have a brain tumour	10

For the next week or so, write down any anxious thoughts you have about your health as you go about your day. Try to get into the habit of noticing them. Notice if any of them fall into the unhelpful thinking styles categories that we looked at previously.

This can be quite difficult. Like all skills, you will get better at it with practice. So don't worry about taking a long time over this before moving on to the next section. It may be helpful to ask a friend or family member to help you – they may be able to prompt you to remember the unhelpful, worrying thoughts you experienced.

Think of yourself as a detective – trying to string together clues to what triggers and makes your anxiety worse. Carry paper and a pen with you so you can write things down just after they happen. If you can't do it at the time, try to recall and write down the thoughts as soon as possible after the event.

TACKLING UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

The next step after identifying unhelpful, worrying thoughts is to learn to challenge them, and develop a more realistic, balanced point of view. One of the most straightforward ways to challenge unhelpful thoughts is to weigh up the evidence for and against them, and try come to a more balanced way of thinking.

What is the evidence?

You can think of it like a jury in a court case. To know the truth we need to string together information – hard facts about what actually happened (not just what we think happened). For example if a person with health anxiety who experiences headaches thinks "I have a brain tumour", we can look at the evidence for and against this thought. Is the thought actually true?

Evidence for: Refers to the information that you feel backs up your thought. What makes you think this? It may be how you feel or previous experiences.

Evidence against: Refers to the information that doesn't back up your thought or contradicts your thought. This could be considering the likelihood of having a rare illness, negative results you received from tests, other explanations for symptoms you may be experiencing.

Balanced coping thought: When you have considered all the evidence, try to come to a more balanced, realistic perspective about the situation. You can then learn to say this to yourself to help you cope if you feel anxious again.

Re-rate belief: When you have considered all the evidence and come to a more balanced, realistic perspective about the situation, re-rate how much you believe your original thought. You should find that you do not believe it as much as you did before you looked at all of the evidence.

Sam challenges his worrying thought from earlier in the diary below

Worrying Thought	Evidence For	Evidence Against	Balanced Coping Thought	Re-rate Belief
I have a brain tumour	I've been getting bad headaches recently My uncle had headaches and he died of a brain turnour	I am stressed with work at the moment - maybe that's what's causing the headaches Brain turnours are very rare I've had tests done and I am OK	Although I've been getting a lot of headaches recently, it's probably because I am under a lot of stress at work. Brain tumours are very rare and tests show that I'm OK	3

It can be difficult to think through the evidence for and against your thoughts. Sometimes it can help to ask a partner or friend to help you with this task.

There are other questions that you can ask yourself which might help you challenge your worrying thoughts, listed below.

STOP & THINK

What would you say to yourself if you were not feeling so worried?

What might you say to someone else if they said this to you?

What might your partner or friend say to you about your worries?

What could you say to yourself that is more helpful and less worrying?

Is there anything you can do about your worry? (E.g. change diet, lifestyle) If yes, what? Make a plan!

Does this way of thinking help or benefit you in any way? How?

Does this way of thinking hold you back? How?

THE GOAL

The goal of this task is to teach you to recognise and tackle thoughts which make you anxious about your health. Ideally in the end you will have learned this skill and will be able to apply it any time you need it. In the beginning it will be helpful to write the thoughts down in a table as it will help you both identify and tackle them in a structured way.

As time progresses, you may find that you only need to note the unhelpful thought and the balanced coping thought, or eventually you can learn to do this in your head.

This is not likely to happen overnight.

Challenging thoughts is a new skill. Like learning any new skill it will take time. Remember to reward yourself for your efforts with praise and/or treats.

If you wish to find about identifying and tackling unhelpful thoughts, there are several workbooks that can lead you through examples of people learning to tackle their unhelpful thinking. 'Manage you Mind' is an excellent workbook which is available in all libraries in the South of Glasgow, as well as bookstores.

ALTERNATIVE TECHNIQUES TO MANAGE UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

Distraction

If you constantly worry about your health, trying to focus on something else can be useful. Some techniques that might be helpful in distracting you are:

Reading or talking: Carry a book, magazine or newspaper with you to read. Talk to whoever is with you.

Mental games: Games that require concentration can help to distract you from worrying thoughts. For example, thinking of boys and girls names beginning with each letter of the alphabet, then an animal etc. Number games such as counting backwards, crosswords, and puzzles can be helpful.

Pay attention to your surroundings: What can you see, hear, smell and feel? Describe to yourself everything you see in great detail.

Do something. Giving yourself a task to do can take your mind off your worrying thoughts. Regular exercise is one of the best ways to manage anxiety. Try going for a walk, swim, or gardening. Reading a book, cooking, or listening to the radio can also help.

SUMMARY

- Notice what you say to yourself when you feel anxious about your health
- You can learn to change unhelpful, worrying thoughts about your health to more helpful, realistic thoughts which can help you to cope better with your anxiety
- There are a number of questions you can ask yourself to help you change the way you think
- It will take time to learn this new skill
- Distraction is a useful short term technique, but not recommended in the long term



SECTION 4: HEALTH ANXIETY & BEHAVIOUR

When we experience anxiety about our health, the way we cope with situations and how we behave often changes. The way we respond to the unhelpful worrying thoughts we have about our health is important. There are certain things that we do that can keep health anxiety going.

These include:

- · Seeking comfort and reassurance from others
- Monitoring and checking physical symptoms
- Finding out about illness
- Avoiding things to do with illness
- · Acting as though you are ill



STOP & THINK

Make a list of the things that you do when you experience worrying thoughts. Then consider how helpful they are in stopping you worry. Give each behaviour a rating for how helpful it was for you at the time and then another rating for how helpful it was to you in the long-term (0=not helpful at all, 10=extremely helpful). Look at some examples below:

What I do when I worry about my health	How helpful was it at the time?	How helpful was it in the long-term?	
Seek reassurance from my partner	8	2	
Go to the doctor	10	4	
Look up symptoms on the internet	2	0	

It may also be helpful to consider the advantages and disadvantages of engaging in the behaviours that you have noted down.



STOP & THINK

List the advantages and disadvantages of the behaviours you engage in when you worry about your health.

Advantages	Disadvantages
When I get reassurance from my husband I feel better	I have to ask him for reassurance time and time again.
	I become very tense and he becomes frustrated with me.
	I feel annoyed with myself that I keep asking the same things

If you have found that there are more disadvantages than benefits to your behaviours then you may want to start to take action to overcome them. The next section looks at ways in which can deal with unhelpful behaviours.



OVERCOMING UNHELPFUL BEHAVIOURS

Seeking comfort and reassurance from others

If we are constantly worried about our health, we may find that we are always looking for reassurance or comfort from others that we are okay, whether it be from family, friends, or the doctor. This reassurance or comfort relieves our worries at first and may make us feel better, however, this does not tend to last and the worry soon returns. When we get into the habit of needing reassurance every time we worry, we get into a pattern of behaviour that keeps health anxiety going. This is because we think about our symptoms more and more often and become more aware of them. As time goes on, it may be that we do not get comfort from reassurance seeking and that we feel worse or begin to look for more comfort.

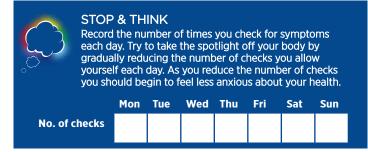
When you feel worried about your health, try not to ask for comfort from anyone else. Ask your friends and family to help you by not comforting you. If you speak to them about your health, ask them to change the subject. Although this may make you feel worse in the short-term, reducing the number of times you ask for reassurance or comfort will make you less anxious in the long-term.

It is more helpful if you learn to comfort yourself. Try to find other ways of coping with your worry. It may help to distract yourself. Try doing something active such as going for a walk. Keep busy. Clean the house, do a hobby you enjoy, or read. Find an alternative behaviour that works for you.

STOP & THINK Keep a record of how many times you ask for comfort and how worried you feel each day. Try to reduce the times that you ask for comfort each day over a week. Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat Sun No. of times I asked for comfort **How worried I** felt (0-10) 0=not worried. 10= extremely worried

MONITORING & CHECKING PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

It has been widely reported of the benefits of carrying out simple checks on your health every so often, e.g. checking your breasts once a month. Focusing on your body and constantly checking for symptoms, however, can lead you to become aware of the slightest changes in your body and can make you feel more anxious. The more you focus on one area or symptom, the more you notice it. Try focusing on your throat for a few minutes – swallow three times. Notice how this focus brings on difficulty in swallowing. As human beings, our bodies are constantly changing and often the symptoms we experience are entirely harmless, or are related to the anxiety that we have about our health.



FINDING OUT ABOUT ILLNESS

Knowing too much about health can sometimes be a bad thing. It can lead you to focus on your body and symptoms, which can increase anxiety about your health. Many of the symptoms associated with illness can be similar and are often quite vague. It is important to remember that many things can contribute to changes in your body. If you think that you are finding out about illness too often, you can try to stop this by:

- Not reading medical books, or medical articles in magazines
- Not looking at medical sites on the internet
- Not watching every single medical programme on television

Ask your family and friends to support you in this. When you are tempted to find out about illness, try to find another way of coping with your worries. Distract yourself.



Keep a record of the number of times you look for illness information each week. Try to reduce the amount of times you find out about illness each week.

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Internet				
TV				
Books, articles etc				

AVOIDING THINGS TO DO WITH ILLNESS

Avoidance is a way of reducing our fears and anxieties by not facing up to the things that we fear. Some people may avoid finding out about illness because it causes them distress or makes them feel more anxious. For example, they may avoid watching television programmes, speaking about illness, or reading anything related to illness. However, by avoiding such things they are keeping the vicious cycle of anxiety going. Avoidance is a quick fix and can work to reduce anxiety in the short-term but it does not untangle problems in the long-term. The fear of illness simply continues to build and can get out of control.



STOP & THINK

Make a list of the ways in which you avoid things to do with illness. Then, starting with the thing you avoid least, start doing it! Tackle each thing in turn.

What I have avoided

Least



Reading about heart disease in paper

Listening to other people talking



Watching TV programme on heart disease

ACTING AS THOUGH YOU ARE ILL

Many people who worry about their health stop doing things because they worry that it will bring on illness. The trouble with this is that by limiting activity and exercise, they become less fit and healthy. Longer-term this has a negative impact on their mood and increases health risks.



It is important to return to normal activities. If you have been inactive for a while, don't expect too much too soon. Make a plan. Each day, spend a little time gently doing the first step on your list. Work through your list step by step.





Review

While you are making changes to your behaviour, it is important to review how you are getting on at regular intervals. Ask yourself:

- What did you do that helped it go well?
- How did you feel after you carried out your plan?
- Was there anything you would do differently next time?

Continue to do this regularly as it will allow you to see your progress. Keeping track of these things will help you to learn more about what works for you and what doesn't. This way, your skills will improve more quickly.









One way of doing this is keeping track of past experiences – times when you did well, times when you did less well, what you have tried and how you got on.

It is important to be realistic about your progress. It will take time to overcome stress and anxiety and to notice changes in it. Things will not run smoothly all of the time. You may find yourself in a muddle and face some setbacks; this is to be expected and they can teach you about what you can do differently next time.

Managing anxiety should be seen as a long-term goal. It will take practice and effort over time. You may well face setbacks and have bad days, but you can try to accept these as normal and learn from them to keep you moving forwards.

CHMMADV

When you feel anxious:

- Try to breathe slowly
- Practise relaxation
- Distract yourself
- Tackle your upsetting thoughts

Further help and information

For more information or advice please contact Wellbeing Services on **0141 232 2555** or visit the website **www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk**

Wellbeing Services is a Primary Care Mental Health Team based in the South of Glasgow. Wellbeing Services offer a variety of services to assist people with common mental health problems and helps them see a brighter tomorrow.





