

SELF HELP FOR HEALTH ANXIETY

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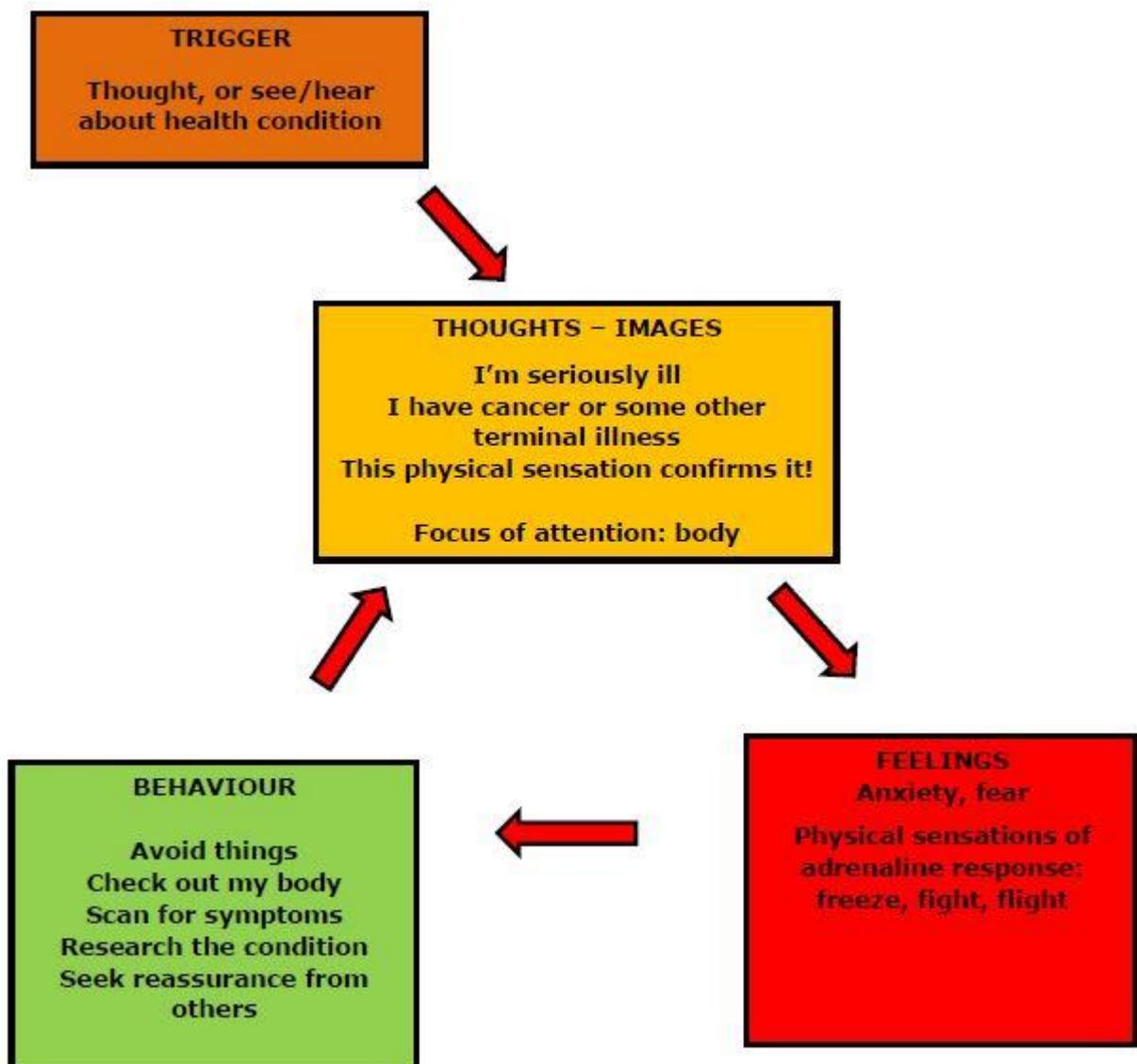
Individuals with Health Anxiety have an obsessive preoccupation with being seriously ill.

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.



THINKING DIFFERENTLY: Focus of attention

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.

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.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY: [Challenging the worrying thoughts](#)



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 effect 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?

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](#) (see page 8)

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!

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. See **Overcoming Avoidance** to help you identify and work out a plan to help you face your fears and reduce the avoidance. See also FACE Fear and Anxiety video on that webpage.

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

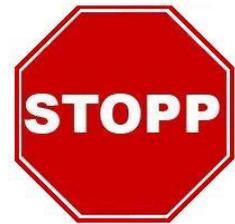
STOP! - just pause for a moment

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** (See Page 6-7). 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). What's the **bigger picture**?

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



THE SUPER SCANNER



We have our own inbuilt super-scanners which are programmed to look for other signals, and it seems the sensitivity can vary.



For example, some people can sleep through anything - partners snoring, trains speeding by and thunderstorms. Yet those same people, after they've just had a baby, can be woken by the slightest snuffle. It seems we have an inbuilt scanner, that keeps us alert to certain signals, even when we're sleeping. It's constantly scanning for the signal, then triggering the body's alarm system which wakes us up, even from the deepest sleep, to attend to the baby.

Someone who worries about being burgled might have a super-scanner which is set to be highly sensitive to noises that are different from those we normally hear at night. A knocking sound will have them instantly awake, alert and anxious. On investigation, they might realise it was a twig tapping against the window, the anxiety subsides - and they can sleep reassured they're safe.

Our own super-scanners may be very personal to us, to our style of thinking, to our problem. Someone who is feeling depressed is likely to notice only the negative or bad things that happen, or interpret ordinary or positive events in a negative way. Their negative or gloomy super-scanner working overtime so that they only notice the negative or bad stuff.

Someone who gets anxious in social situations, might have a super-scanner that is constantly trying to read situations and people. Looking for a look, a tone of voice, something someone says or does. Trying to interpret what others are thinking, or 'really' thinking (critically of us) in spite of what they say. This mind-reading super-scanner is so highly sensitive that it creates meaning where there is none, or gives a very inaccurate meaning. We cannot know what others think.



If we're worried about our health, then the super-scanner might be constantly on, scanning for body sensations, which we might then interpret as meaning we're seriously ill.

If we suffer from panic attacks, then the super-scanner is going to be alert for those physical sensations (e.g. racing heart beat) which we believe indicates we're in immediate mortal danger!

If we've experienced a trauma in the past, then maybe our super-scanner would be scanning for any reminders of that trauma - something we see, hear, smell - anything that reminds us. The scanner then then triggers a distressing flashback.

Someone with low self-esteem might have a super-scanner that works continuously to find situations or triggers which cause us to think critically about ourselves.

Maybe your super-scanner is continuously scanning for something else. Understanding what your own personal super-scanner is doing, will help you understand what is keeping your problem going now.

Once your super-scanner is triggered, your focus of attention is right there. Your scanner and your thoughts react to the scanner, zoom into the foreground of your

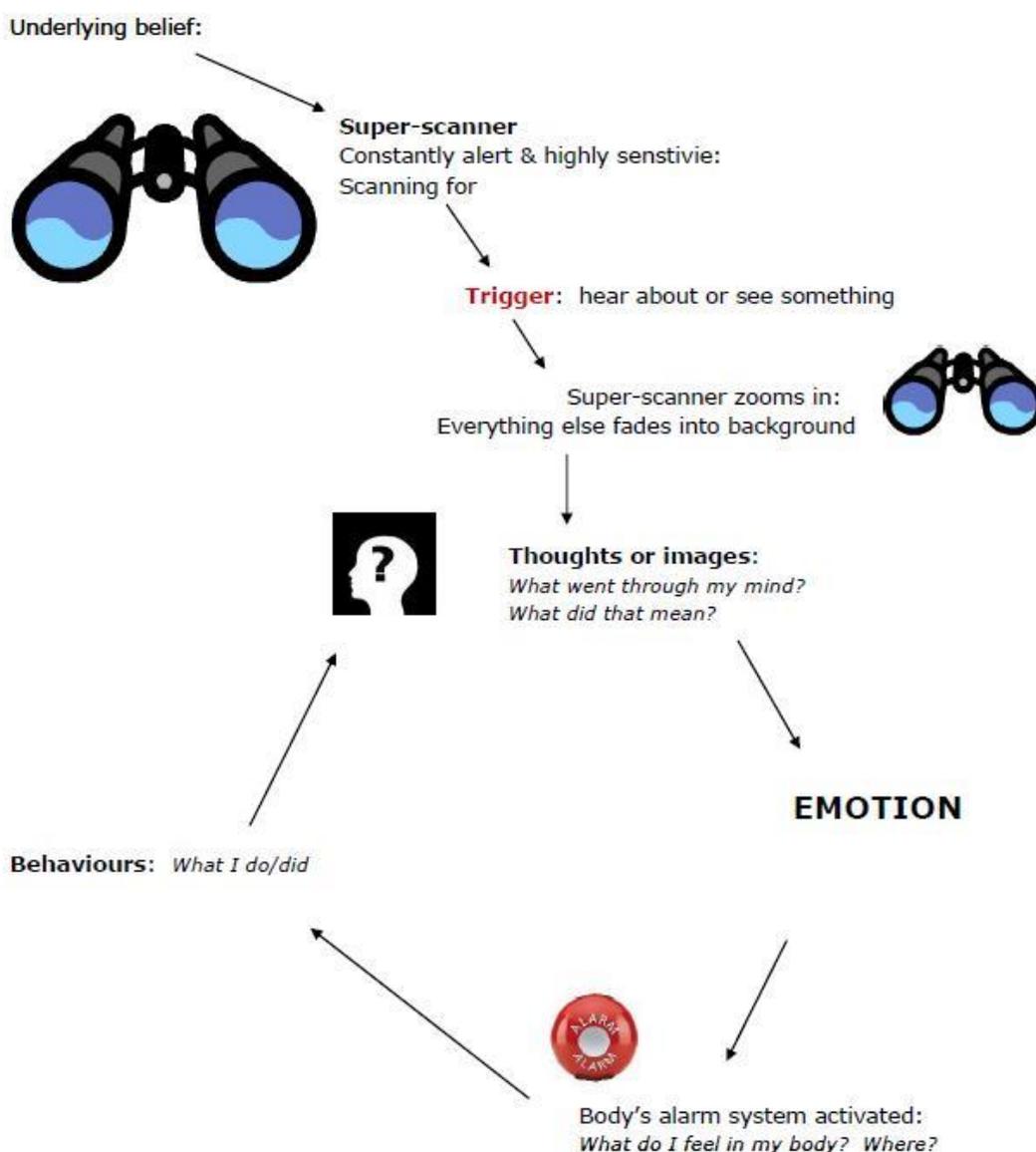
attention, and everything else fades into the background.

We can learn to notice the highly-sensitive super-scanner, and turn the sensitivity dial down. It can be a useful mechanism so we don't want to turn it off completely, but we can improve our ability to interpret the readings accurately, and adjust the way we react to the scanner.



- Notice the scanner: "That's that super-scanner again!"
 - Readjust the sensitivity dial: "Okay, the scanner is noticing that **????????**, and that is triggering these unhelpful thoughts."
 - There's no need to fight the thoughts, you can notice them, and let them pass.
 - Change your focus of attention:
 - Move on - do and/or think about something else.
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How the Super-Scanner works



Health Anxiety Thought Record

Situation What was happening? What were you doing? Who with? Where? When?	Trigger for Anxiety about Health Physical sensation or symptom? Thought? Hearing about illness?	Anxiety Rate intensity (0-100%)	Unhelpful Thoughts or Images Write most unhelpful or distressing thought or image How much do you believe that thought? 0-100% Focus on body 0 – 100%	Behaviour What did you do? <input type="checkbox"/> Check? <input type="checkbox"/> Seek reassurance? What didn't you do? (Avoidance) How long for?	Alternative Response What would be a rational & more balanced perspective? Is there another way of looking at this? How much do you believe this different perspective? 0-100%	Outcome Re-rate intensity of anxiety 0-100% What was helpful?
	<i>What did you feel? Where in your body? How long for?</i>		<i>What did that mean about your health? What's the worst thing about that – the worst thing that could happen? How much of your focus of attention was taken up with thinking about your body and your symptoms?</i>	<i>Write everything you did or didn't do & how long for. What and how did you check the symptom? How did you seek reassurance about it? Did you avoid doing anything?</i>	<i>Is this fact or opinion? What would someone else make of this? What advice would I give a friend? Is my reaction in proportion? Is the problem that I'm seriously ill - or is it my belief that I'm seriously ill that is causing physical symptoms of anxiety?</i>	<i>What are the consequences of acting this way? What will help most? What would be the best thing to do for me, and for this situation?</i>