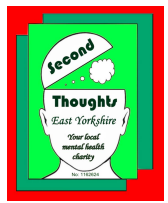


# Health Anxiety Management



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

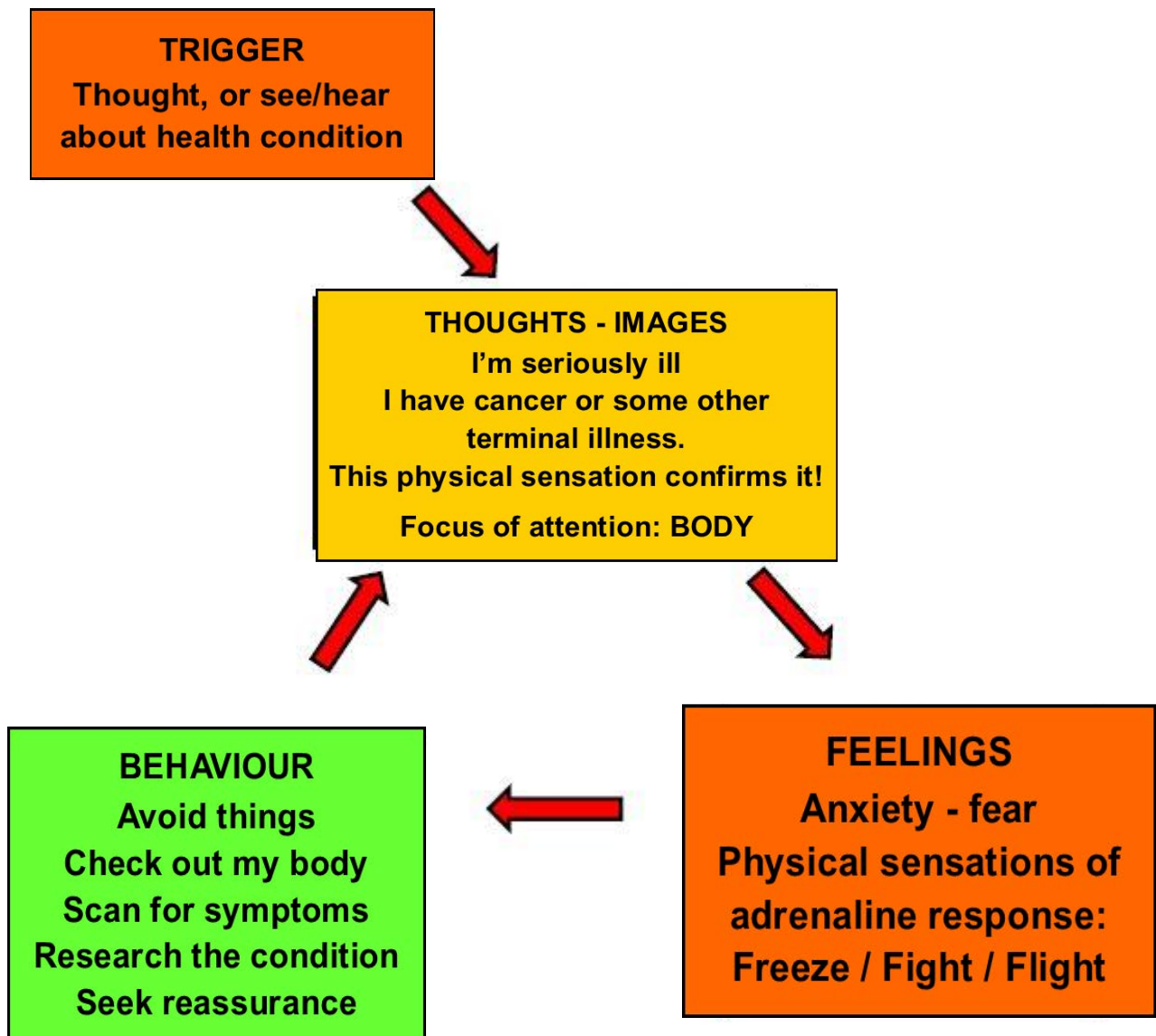
If someone believes they have a serious illness, such as cancer or a brain tumour, then any innocent or normal physical sensation can be seen as a symptom of that serious illness, and serves to confirm that they 'MUST' be seriously ill.

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.

You can access our 'Health Anxiety' relaxation mp3 online by scanning the QR code



## 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

#### Notice the part of the body, notice new sensations.

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.

## Why should I try and stop worrying about my health,, isn't that dangerous??

- It is true that we all need to take good care of our health and seek help where appropriate but....
- You can never be sure that your health is perfect.
- Living with some uncertainty is normal and healthy.
- But, you can waste a lot of time worrying that something is seriously wrong and picturing the outcome if it is.
- Imagine that you are 90 years old and looking back on your life. Think how you might feel about all those years wasted in worry about your health if your fears turn out not to be true!
- What good things could you do if you were not worrying about your health?
- Try this. If you think about one part of your body for too long you are bound to notice strange sensations. For example, try focusing on your throat for a few minutes swallow three times. Notice how this focus brings on difficulty in swallowing and sensations in that area.
- If you start prodding or pressing a particular area on your body you may cause yourself pain and discomfort. Your checking for illnesses can make you feel ill - ironic eh?

Try making a list of the 'advantages' and disadvantages of the habit of continuing to worry about your health. For example::

**Advantage** - 'When I feel that I have a lump, or maybe a mole which has changed, I feel reassured when my partner checks for me and says that he doesn't think it is a lump, or the mole looks no different to him'.

**Disadvantage** – *'I keep checking it and ask him to look at it time and time again. I get short tempered and very tense, and he gets cross with me' causing an atmosphere between us.*

**Advantage** - 'I keep looking up information online about different kinds of illnesses, going from one condition to another. I feel a bit better when I have checked things out'

**Disadvantage** – *'In the longer term I am spending hours and hours online doing this, and feel worried about my health whilst I am doing it'.*

## How can I alter worrying thoughts about my health?

We have already explained that some ways of thinking can make health anxiety worse. These thoughts can also be pictures in your mind.

The best way to stop these worrying thoughts is to think other less anxious, more balanced thoughts.

Here are some examples of how you can do this:

### ***Worrying thought or picture***

*“Any new body change/symptom is a sign of something serious... I seem to have a lot of headaches just now...”*

### **Balanced thought**

“People have body changes and symptoms all the time, it is normal and it is rarely a sign of serious illness... headaches are often a sign of stress or dehydration...”

### ***Worrying thought or picture***

*“Lots of tests are the only way to know you are well...I may be unwell and don’t know it...”*

### **Balanced thought**

“You cannot have tests all of the time... there is no way to be 100% sure you are well ... better not to waste time worrying about it...”

### ***Worrying thought or picture***

*“My family has a history of heart problems... I’m just waiting and watching for when it happens to me...”*

### **Balanced thought**

“I have discussed this with my doctor and she tells me I am fine. Constant checking is just stressful and bad for my health, I should just try and relax...”

### ***Worrying thought or picture***

*“I have a picture in my head of family around my hospital bed and I am seriously ill...”*

### **Balanced thought**

“What is the point in thinking this way... yes someday I will die but is it really useful to think about it all the time now?”

**Remember if you have health anxiety you will tend to view any information, however neutral, as a sign that something is seriously wrong! Watch out for this and challenge this habit.**

It can help to look at worrying thoughts and more balanced thoughts. Think back to recent health worries and try to do this now. Give reasons for your new more balanced thought using the form on the next page.

## You try it.

Write down your worrying thought, then write down a more balanced thought. Finally, note the benefits of the balanced thought, adding how that has helped.

Focus on each subject area as shown on the cogs on page 2.

One example could be moderating how often you keep checking your body.

Worrying Thought	Balanced Thought	Benefits of Rethinking

## Mindfulness & mindful activity to help De-stress

You can do this every day, even for a set time of doing a mundane activity with your full attention. Try initially for 3 minutes twice daily 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 Grounding Skills handout for more examples](#)**

### **THINKING DIFFERENTLY: Challenging the worrying thoughts**

Remember **thoughts are not facts**, they are just thoughts. We don't have to believe everything we think! The problem isn't that we are seriously ill, the problem is that we THINK that 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 FEEL 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.

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!**