Health anxiety attention experiment

Compare specific observations. A difference is useful information, not a demand to feel calm or certain.

Editable PDF: replace or delete the fictional examples. Blank PDF: print and write. Guidance follows.

Familiar worry and relevant agreed care

e.g. A familiar worry; keep my existing healthcare plan.

Usual attention - recalled

Attention pattern and prediction

e.g. Usually scan my body during a conversation.

Participation and checking urge

e.g. Miss parts of what the other person says.

What I noticed; what remains uncertain

e.g. More sensations noticed; uncertainty remained.

Engaged attention - tried

Attention pattern and prediction

e.g. Listen to the conversation and ask a question.

Participation and checking urge

e.g. Joined in more; the urge to check still appeared.

What I noticed; what remains uncertain

e.g. Attention shifted; this does not establish whether I am healthy.

What I learned / what is still uncertain

e.g. I could participate while uncertain; medical questions still follow my care plan.

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Using this resource

Health anxiety attention experiment

What this helps with

When attention keeps returning to the body, familiar sensations may become more prominent. Exploring attention can help you understand this part of your anxiety cycle. The experiment is about how attention and engagement change your experience, not about proving that a symptom is harmless. Observe your usual pattern briefly in retrospect, then practise engaging with an ordinary external task. Avoid deliberately increasing symptom monitoring to create a stronger comparison.

How to use it

1. Choose a familiar health worry and confirm any relevant care plan with your clinician or therapist.
2. Describe a recent period of habitual body attention and its effects. Do not recreate extra checking.
3. Choose an ordinary task for a brief period, letting sensations be present while attending to the task.
4. Compare engagement, urge to check and learning. Do not use repeated physical measurements to judge success.

A fictional worked example

Louise notices that a familiar, assessed sensation becomes the centre of her attention while she reads health forums. Her prediction is, "I cannot focus on anything else while this is here." Instead of checking more closely as a test, she records the pattern from yesterday. She then spends ten minutes helping her niece choose a birthday card, allowing the sensation to remain in the background. She notices that her attention shifts in and out of the task, and she still contributes to the conversation. She learns something about flexibility of attention; she does not conclude that the sensation's cause has been medically established.

Keep in mind

This exercise is not a diagnostic test and must not delay needed care. Continue agreed monitoring. Choose an ordinary, safe activity and do not induce symptoms or deliberately intensify body scanning. If symptoms are new or concerning, seek appropriate medical advice rather than testing attention.

Sources and attribution

Warwick, H. M. C., & Salkovskis, P. M. (1990). Hypochondriasis. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 28(2), 105-117.

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