Health anxiety cycle

Map one health worry. Keep agreed medical care; this sheet cannot assess physical symptoms.

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

What I noticed

A body sensation, piece of information or other trigger

e.g. A headache after a long day.

Feared health meaning

What did I think it meant?

e.g. What if this is a serious illness?

Anxiety and attention

What did I feel or start monitoring?

e.g. Anxious; repeatedly focus on the pain.

Checking, reassurance or avoidance

What did I do to try to feel safe?

e.g. Search for symptoms and ask someone to reassure me.

Effect now and later

What changed briefly? What happened to the fear later?

e.g. Brief reassurance; then another doubt and more searching.

The return arrow shows how later effects can keep the pattern going.

Episode map informed by Warwick & Salkovskis (1990). Medical decisions need appropriate care.

Copyright Calm Breathing Therapies

Using this resource

Health anxiety cycle

What this helps with

Health anxiety concerns how health-related uncertainty is interpreted and managed; it does not mean that symptoms are invented or that physical illness is impossible. In the cognitive-behavioural model, checking, reassurance and avoidance can keep threat prominent even when they bring temporary relief. This worksheet helps map one example without deciding what a symptom means medically. Include diagnosed conditions and agreed care so that therapy supports, rather than replaces, appropriate healthcare.

How to use it

1. Start with one sensation, event or piece of information.
2. Write the health problem you feared it meant.
3. Add the anxiety, body focus or monitoring that followed.
4. Record checking, reassurance seeking or avoidance, then the short-term and later effects. Keep agreed medical care separate from repeated attempts to feel certain.
5. Follow the return arrow to consider whether the fear stayed believable. Discuss a possible change separately, without delaying needed healthcare.

A fictional worked example

Farah reads an article about illness and notices a familiar ache. Her interpretation is, "The earlier assessment must have missed something." She examines the area repeatedly and searches the same symptom with slightly different wording. Each search reassures her briefly before another doubt appears. Her map includes the follow-up already agreed with her GP, which stays in place. It also shows that the extra searches increase her focus on the ache and interrupt family time. The treatment question is how to respond to repeated doubt outside that care plan, not whether an online worksheet can prove that she is healthy.

Keep in mind

Continue prescribed treatment, screening, monitoring and follow-up. New, worsening or concerning symptoms need appropriate medical advice. Health anxiety can coexist with physical illness. This worksheet cannot rule out disease or tell you whether to seek care; discuss uncertainty about that with a healthcare professional.

Sources and attribution

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

NHS. Health anxiety. Accessed 24 October 2026.

Original material informed by the sources above. No outside organisation endorses this worksheet.

Copyright Calm Breathing Therapies