Health anxiety: two explanations

Use with a therapist. Keep agreed medical care in place.

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

What started the health worry?

e.g. I read an online article about an illness.

Explanation 1: what am I afraid this means?

e.g. I may have a hidden illness and need to keep searching.

Explanation 2: how might anxiety and checking contribute?

e.g. The article triggered doubt; searching brings brief relief then more doubt.

What would each explanation predict about worry and checking?

e.g. 1: searching will settle this. 2: searching will lead to more doubt.

What safe task and medical boundaries will we agree?

e.g. With my therapist: leave the article and return to my planned call.

What happened, and what can I reasonably conclude?

e.g. I took part in the call with some worry present. This is not a medical test.

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Health anxiety: two explanations - guide

Use alongside the worksheet on page 1. Adapt it to your needs and any therapy plan.

What this helps with

Health anxiety can make a feared interpretation feel like the only explanation. With your therapist, consider whether anxiety, attention and checking also help explain the pattern. This sheet examines the worry process; it cannot establish whether a physical illness is present or absent.

How to use it

1. Choose one episode and separate what you noticed from what you feared it meant.

2. Write the feared explanation and an alternative about the anxiety process. Both anxiety and a physical health condition can be present.

3. With your therapist, compare predictions about attention, checking, reassurance and daily activity. Do not create symptom tests or try to prove the absence of illness.

4. Agree a safe small task within your medical care plan, then record what it teaches about the worry process and what remains uncertain.

A fictional example

Priya reads about an illness and repeatedly searches for further signs. Her feared explanation is that stopping would be irresponsible. An alternative is that searching is increasing doubt and the urge to check. Within her agreed care plan, she closes the article and returns to a phone call. She learns she can remain involved despite uncertainty; the exercise tells her nothing definitive about her medical health.

Keep in mind

Keep prescribed treatment, necessary tests and agreed medical appointments. Do not use this sheet to decide whether a symptom needs assessment or to delay urgent care. Seek appropriate medical advice for new, severe, changing or unexplained symptoms. A therapist-guided experiment must not involve unsafe exertion, stopping medicines or withholding needed care.

Review your learning

What did this show about attention, reassurance or checking, without turning learning into a guarantee?

Sources informing the approach

Warwick, H. M., & Salkovskis, P. M. (1990). Hypochondriasis. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 28(2), 105-117. doi:10.1016/0005-7967(90)90023-C.

NHS. Health anxiety.

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