

Top Tips for Managing Health Anxiety

Learn About Anxiety

Anxiety has kept us safe for centuries. When we sense danger our fight/flight response activates and our body prepares to fight or flee from danger. Our heart rate increases, our breathing changes, and our muscles tense up ready for action. With all the adrenalin pumping around our body we might also feel: chest pain, nausea, hot flushes, pins and needles, light headedness, and our limbs might feel shaky. These changes don't feel pleasant, but they're not harmful. So many of these symptoms are non-specific and can be mistaken for symptoms of serious health conditions.

Avoid Researching Symptoms on the Internet

There are a range of medical sites on the internet that allow you to research your symptoms and self-diagnose. The problem with these sites is that most symptoms can be linked to any number of medical conditions. A headache can be a symptom of muscle tension, whip lash, tiredness, dehydration, a common cold, AIDS, cancer, stroke, meningitis, encephalitis, and the list goes on. None of these sites offer a comprehensive assessment of your symptoms, but they will increase your anxiety. Try to limit your internet research or avoid it all together.

Trust Your Doctor

Even with all your reading and research with at least 10 years of specialist medical training, your general practitioner still has more medical knowledge and more experience than you. Also keep in mind that your doctor doesn't want to misdiagnose you and will be thorough in their assessment and treatment recommendations.

If you still want a second opinion that's ok, but if both doctors say the same thing then be open to the possibility that your anxiety may be influencing your judgments about your health.

Challenge Your Anxiety

Anxiety is convincing and it can make our fears seem very real. Most people say that when they're not feeling anxious they know their health concerns are irrational but that this changes when anxiety is involved.

When you're feeling anxious write down your thoughts – What health issues are you concerned about? What makes you think you have this illness? Then try to look at your thoughts objectively. Ask yourself: How many times have I worried about this? How many times have my worries actually been right? Can my symptoms be explained by anything else? What has my doctor said?

Learning to listen to the facts instead of your anxiety will take time but it's a critical skill for managing your health anxiety.

think TOP TIPS

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HEALTH ANXIETY

There are times when it's normal to be preoccupied with your health – like after a health scare – but ongoing worry about your health might become a problem in itself.

When you're worried about your health you're more likely to check your body for symptoms. When you notice a symptom you're also more likely to attribute it to a serious illness.

As you get increasingly anxious, you start to experience physical symptoms of anxiety – anything from chest pain and trouble breathing to pins and needles and hot flushes – which adds to your worry and make you even more anxious.

To cope you might:

- Request medical tests
- Seek reassurance from doctors
- Seek second and third opinions
- Talk to friends about your symptoms
- Research symptoms on the internet

But while this might offer you short-term relief from your worry, in the longer-term checking and reassurance seeking makes anxiety worse.

This tips sheet covers basic strategies for overcoming health anxiety. If your anxiety continues, speak to your GP about a referral to a clinical psychologist.