



**Let's Talk Health Anxiety:
A Self Help Guide**

Written By: Mary Galvin

Let's Talk Health Anxiety – A Self Help Guide

Acknowledgements for editing to Jan Bagnall (Locality Clinical Lead)

Acknowledgements for design and administration to Emma Hall (Administrator) and Sue Freeman (Administrator)

Let's Talk is Gloucestershire's Improving Access to Psychological Therapy (IAPT) Service.

Let's Talk is a free service from the NHS.

We offer short-term talking therapies to people with mild to moderate depression and anxiety.

Our Self Help guides provide an introduction to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy at Step 1 of our programme of support.

The authors have made every effort to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information in this workbook. However, it is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice or treatment. Any person with a condition requiring medical attention should consult a qualified medical practitioner or suitable therapist. Evidence suggests that a self-help material is most effective when you are supported by an appropriately qualified clinician. We strongly advise that when using this workbook you stay in touch with your named clinician. If for any reason you are unable to reach them and you are feeling concerned about your mental health we recommend you go to see your doctor. Other agencies that can help you are listed in the back of this workbook.

For further information please contact:

Let's Talk
2gether NHS Foundation Trust
Rikenel, Montpellier, Gloucester, GL1 1LY
Website: www.talk2gether.nhs.uk

Let's Talk Health Anxiety

Managing Health Anxiety using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Introduction

The aim of this self-help guide is to help you to identify whether you may be experiencing symptoms of Health Anxiety. It also includes a number of helpful steps you may wish to take to manage your symptoms and wellbeing using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

Anybody can experience Health Anxiety and levels of severity can vary considerably. You may find that after reading this self-help guide you wish to further develop strategies for improvement and to increase your understanding of your difficulties. You can do this by contacting Let's Talk.

Gloucestershire's FREE NHS IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapy) Service. We will tell you more about this at the end of this leaflet. If you feel in need of immediate support please contact your GP.

What is Health Anxiety?

Health Anxiety, also referred to as Hypochondriasis, can be viewed as a difficulty related to anxiety about our health that has persisted for at least six months. The main characteristic of health anxiety is the belief or fear that we have, or that we will develop in the future, a serious illness or disease that may lead to a catastrophic outcome or indeed death. This belief is usually based on our misinterpretation of very real harmless bodily symptoms. Health worries may focus on physical sensations, physical differences to others and bodily functions.

We are likely to become preoccupied with these fears and to develop a range of "checking behaviours". A typical checking behaviour is that we begin to frequently scan our body for any physical signs of illness or unusual sensations. As well as this we are likely to seek lots of reassurance, often from our GP or

from other sources, such as reading health related literature or endlessly surfing the internet, or from family and friends. These behaviours are likely to increase our anxiety and cause considerable distress. Reassurance seeking behaviours do not offer us any long-term relief from our anxieties, which soon return, often with an increased intensity, and this in turn leads us to seek further reassurance.

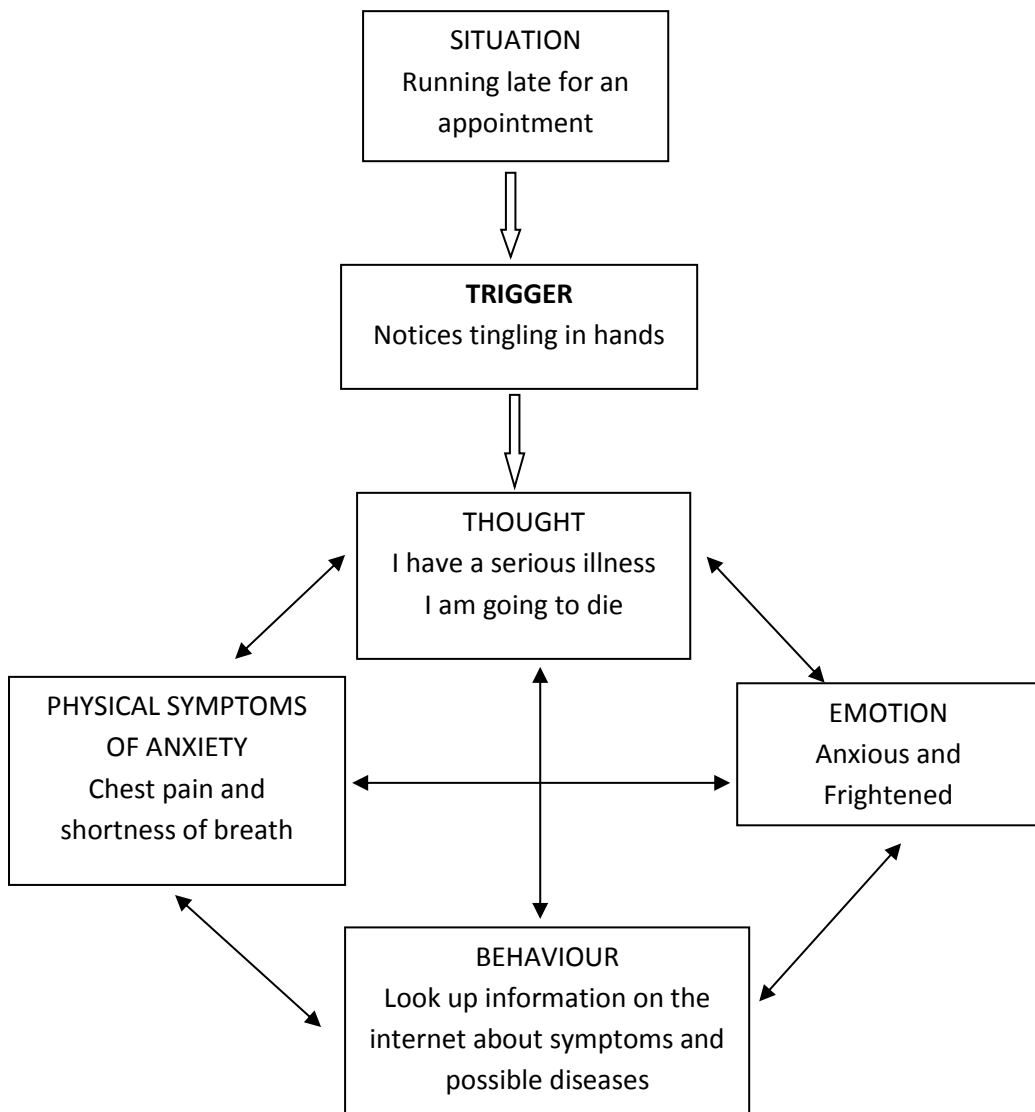
These fears and beliefs persist, despite appropriate medical tests, evaluations, examinations and reassurance from your GP that all is well. This focus on health and illness can cause significant distress in important areas of our lives, for example, family, social, work and others. These fears can become overwhelming and have a significant impact on your day to day functioning, increasing anxiety and causing significant distress.

When we experience increased anxiety we are also likely to experience physical symptoms, specifically caused by anxiety. Some, but not all, examples of this are increased heart rate, chest pains, shallow rapid breathing, shakiness, dizziness, tingling, pins and needles. These symptoms of anxiety are then likely to exacerbate and to increase our thoughts of and focus on severe illness.

Our thoughts and worries about our own health, when we are experiencing Health Anxiety, are often centred around our perception of physical signs, sensations and responses in our body, which we may become very focused on. When any of us focus on any part of our body, or if we poke or prod certain areas of our body to check for signs of illness, then we are likely to notice unfamiliar sensations and lumps or bumps that we were not aware of previously. These signs may be misinterpreted, or mistaken, as symptoms of a serious or life threatening illness.

Therefore it is understandable that we feel extremely anxious, which in turn increases physical arousal and symptoms of anxiety, which in turn we misinterpret, or mistake, as signs of a serious illness. We become caught in a vicious cycle of Health Anxiety.

The vicious cycle of Health Anxiety



Do I have Health Anxiety?

Many peoples' experiences of Health Anxiety are unique to them, although there are a range of symptoms that are commonly associated with Health Anxiety.

Any type of anxiety will affect us in different ways and will affect the way that we think (our cognitions), the way that we feel (our mood), what we do (our behaviours) and the way that our body functions and works (physiology and physical symptoms of anxiety).

If you notice that you are regularly experiencing some or all of the following symptoms, then it is likely that you have Health Anxiety:

TYPICAL THINKING PATTERNS IN HEALTH ANXIETY

- ✓ Frequently worrying about your health and the possibility that you have a serious and life threatening illness
- ✓ Thinking about illnesses and related symptoms
- ✓ Focusing on specific or various parts of your body for unfamiliar physical sensations
- ✓ Worrying that you will not be able to cope if you do become ill
- ✓ Worrying about your family and how they will cope if you become seriously ill
- ✓ Thoughts and images of the worst possible health outcomes, imagining yourself bedbound and dependent upon others
- ✓ Worry and superstitious beliefs – such as “If I worry then I can protect myself from becoming ill” or “If I do not worry about my health, then I am tempting fate”
- ✓ Worrying that if I do not keep checking my body, then I will miss something important

- ✓ Worrying that you did not explain all of your symptoms clearly enough to your GP
- ✓ Worrying that your GP has misunderstood you, did not take you seriously or has missed something important
- ✓ Thoughts that I must go to see my GP for help
- ✓ Worrying about waiting lists for medical tests and thinking of ways of paying for private treatment

TYPICAL THOUGHTS IN HEALTH ANXIETY

- ✓ I am struggling to breathe, something is wrong
- ✓ I have cancer
- ✓ I do not feel well so I must be really ill
- ✓ I have pains in my chest, this is more serious than anxiety
- ✓ I won't be able to cope with a serious illness
- ✓ My family and friends will not cope with my illness
- ✓ What will happen to my friends and family if I become seriously ill
- ✓ I will be a burden to my family and friends
- ✓ I am going to die and it will be a horrid painful death
- ✓ Doctor's don't always make the correct diagnosis
- ✓ My symptoms have got worse since I was last tested
- ✓ This headache may be the sign of a brain tumour
- ✓ I do not feel my normal self, I am going to have a stroke
- ✓ If I do have cancer it will be advanced and untreatable

TYPICAL BEHAVIOURS IN HEALTH ANXIETY

Safety Behaviours

- ✓ Frequent checking for unfamiliar physical sensations in the body
- ✓ Frequent checking and monitoring of bodily functions

- ✓ Frequent checking for any rashes, bruising, tingling, pins and needles, pain, tenderness, bumps and lumps
- ✓ Focusing on particular parts of the body for physical sensations
- ✓ Poking and prodding whilst looking for changes in the body, which make symptoms worse
- ✓ Frequently seeking reassurance from your friends, family and GP
- ✓ Frequent visits to your GP
- ✓ Frequently reading medical literature and scouring the internet, to match your symptoms to illnesses or to find out what they could mean

Avoidant Behaviours

- ✓ Behaving as though you are ill and avoiding physical exertion or exercise to keep yourself safe
- ✓ Excessive resting
- ✓ Avoid travelling far from home for work or social activities so you will not be far from your GP or local hospital
- ✓ Avoid booking holidays or if you do, you research the area and choose your destination based on accessibility of a GP or hospital, just in case
- ✓ Avoiding any potential triggers for your health anxiety such as TV dramas, news programmes or newspaper articles on illness
- ✓ Avoiding others who are ill

TYPICAL FEELINGS IN HEALTH ANXIETY

- ✓ Anxious and nervous
- ✓ Fear and dread
- ✓ Hopelessness

- ✓ Heightened responsibility for how others will cope and feel
- ✓ Self-blame

TYPICAL PHYSICAL RESPONSES TO HEALTH ANXIETY

- ✓ Increased symptoms of anxiety
- ✓ Racing heart
- ✓ Chest pains
- ✓ Shortness of breath
- ✓ Tightness in the throat
- ✓ Light headedness
- ✓ Muscular pain and tension
- ✓ Increased sweating
- ✓ Trembling
- ✓ Numbness and tingling
- ✓ Pins and needles
- ✓ Headaches
- ✓ Having to go the toilet frequently and urgently
- ✓ Feeling on edge
- ✓ Aches and pains generally

WHAT CAUSES HEALTH ANXIETY TO DEVELOP?

Health Anxiety can develop for a number of reasons, which may include;

- ✓ Experiencing serious illness as a child
- ✓ Overly anxious or protective parents /carers who took you to the GP frequently
- ✓ If you have experienced a significant person in your life, such as a parent, partner, friend or brother or sister, developing a serious illness
- ✓ If a significant person in your life dies as a result of a health related issue

- ✓ When we are anxious and / or distressed about other areas of our lives, such as pressures at work, relationship difficulties, financial worries
- ✓ When we experience a life changing event which increases our anxiety generally, such as bereavement, loss of a job, ending of a relationship, financial insecurity
- ✓ When we have a belief such as “Being fit and healthy means that we should not experience any physical signs or symptoms of illness”.
- ✓ When a significant other has Health Anxiety

WHAT MAINTAINS MY HEALTH ANXIETY?

Health Anxiety is maintained by the thoughts and behaviours we originally develop to help us to cope with and to manage our Health Anxiety. As we are often very frightened, distressed, worried, overwhelmed and anxious about our symptoms of Health Anxiety it is understandable that we develop various thinking (cognitive) and behavioural strategies to manage these. Unfortunately, and through no fault of our own, these very strategies then become central in maintaining and increasing our anxieties, they reinforce and strengthen our fears and anxieties as we develop a vicious cycle of thoughts, behaviours and physical and emotional feelings.

Safety Behaviours

Safety behaviours are intended to minimise risk and to prevent illnesses from developing, for example, reassurance seeking, which can happen in a number of ways;

We may constantly check our body and bodily functions which also maintains the focus on health issues and raises our anxiety and increases the physical symptoms of anxiety.

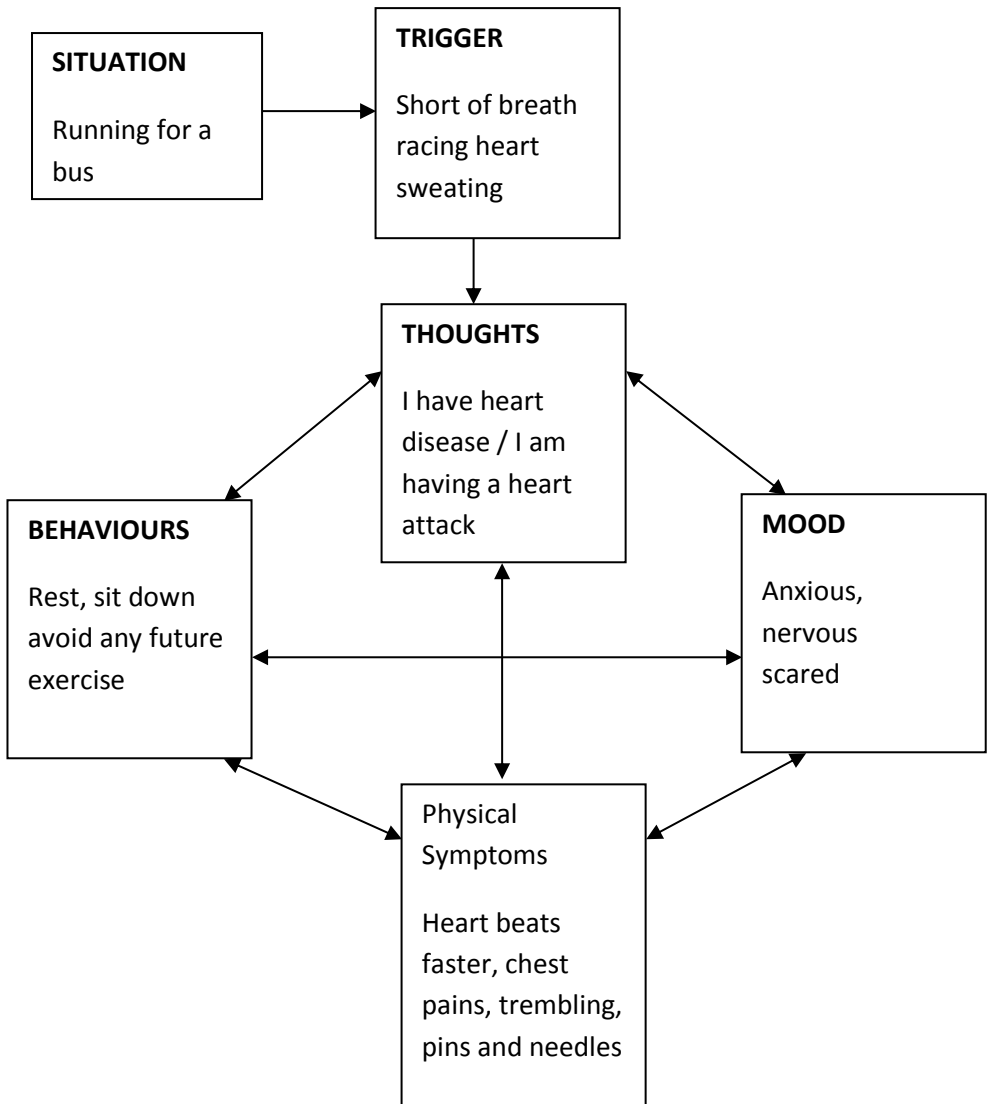
We may constantly seek reassurance from our partner or family members, asking “do I look ill?” “Do you think I should go the Doctor’s?” “Do you think I am ill?” We may frequently visit our GP or Accident and Emergency Departments at our local hospitals, for check-ups, medical tests and in some cases exploratory surgery. The outcome of frequent reassurance seeking is that we may feel reassured for a brief period of time, but then the anxiety returns, often more intensely, as we begin to doubt ourselves and to think that the GP or hospital missed something or that we did not explain or describe our symptoms fully to the Doctor or to our family.

Another form of reassurance seeking is to read medical literature and internet sites, often with the goal of self-diagnosing illnesses or to convince ourselves that we do not have a particular health condition. These behaviours maintain the focus on health issues and increase worry and anxiety as well as leading to increased physical symptoms of anxiety, all of which feed the vicious cycle of Health Anxiety.

Avoidant behaviours

Avoidant behaviours are also intended to minimise risk and to avoid triggering our Health Anxieties. We may purposefully avoid exercise and physical exertion in the belief that an increased heart rate or shortness of breath are signs of serious physical illness or that our bodies cannot cope with this extra strain. The effects of a lack of exercise and physical activity will affect our overall fitness levels and physical wellbeing making us much more likely to get out of breath, sweat and experience increased heart rate when we are active. This is likely to increase our anxiety and therefore the physical symptoms of anxiety

VICIOUS CYCLE OF HEALTH ANXIETY



WHAT STEPS CAN I TAKE TO BEGIN TO OVERCOME MY HEALTH ANXIETY?

There are a number of steps that you can begin to take to reduce your symptoms of Health Anxiety. Remember that your Health Anxiety may have developed gradually over a number of years and is unlikely to disappear overnight, although in continuing to practice certain experiments and interventions, a few of them detailed here, you are likely to see your symptoms begin to decrease and to become more manageable. Helpful interventions will target how you think and how you behave which will enable you to spend less time thinking about and focusing on health issues, which in turn will reduce your anxiety.

You may think that it is important to worry about your health and that in not worrying you could be putting your health at risk. We can never be 100% sure that we have perfect health although we can spend an awful lot of time seeking 100% certainty when this is simply not possible. There is a possibility that any of us may develop a serious illness during our life time. Life can easily pass us by while we focus on our health worries and we may miss many opportunities for happiness and worthwhile experiences. If you have been given a clean bill of health at this time then you do not have anything to lose by trying out some of these strategies and we hope that you will find them very helpful.

Theory A versus Theory B

Are you willing to consider that your main difficulty is how you worry about your health and not your actual health? This might feel quite frightening to consider initially but remember that if we are extremely worried about our health this will leave us feeling very anxious with increased physical symptoms of anxiety. We may then misinterpret our very real physical symptoms as evidence of serious health issues which is likely to lead us into a vicious cycle of unhelpful thoughts and behaviours, as illustrated earlier in this booklet. Our unhelpful thoughts and behaviours will then make our difficulties worse. Therefore, hopefully, you can begin to see that it is helpful to change your focus from health issues to the way that you worry about them.

Take some time to complete the following exercise and when you have finished it, copy it out and keep it somewhere where you will see it often, for example, as a screen saver or card in your purse or wallet, to remind yourself of the important message contained within it.

See the completed example below and then make your own personalised flash card, listing all of your very real fears related to your health worries.

EXAMPLES:

THEORY A - My problem is:

I have a very serious life threatening illness.

I may die because of this illness and it will be a painful and lingering death.

My friends and family will not be able to cope without me around.

I will not be able to cope if I become seriously ill and unable to function.

I will become a burden to my family.

THEORY B – My problem is:

I worry excessively about my health and my worries increase my anxiety

When I am anxious :

I experience physical symptoms of anxiety

I overestimate the possibility that a symptom is evidence of a serious illness

I overestimate the severity and awfulness of any possible illness

I underestimate my ability to cope with illness

**NOW COMPLETE YOUR OWN PERSONALISED THEORY A
AND THEORY B**

THEORY A – My problem is:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

THEORY B – My problem is:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Decrease excessive time spent focusing on your body and symptoms

Having already looked at the effects of checking behaviours, increased anxiety, anxious thoughts, increased physical symptoms of anxiety, and how these develop in to an unhelpful vicious cycle, it will be very helpful for you to reduce these behaviours significantly. In reducing these behaviours you will find that your anxiety decreases and your mood lifts.

First of all it is helpful to measure how many times and how much time you actually spend checking your body for signs of illness or change in physical sensations and bodily functions, by keeping a diary for a few days. Once you have an idea of this set yourself a daily target to reduce the number of daily checks until you have significantly reduced these.

Here is an example:

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon
Time spent checking	35 minutes	30 minutes	25 minutes	20 minutes	15 Minutes	10 minutes	5 minutes	2 minutes
Number of checks	40 times	34 times	29 times	23 times	18 times	12 times	5 times	1 times

Now complete your own diary:

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon
Time spent checking								
Number of checks								

A behaviour experiment to see whether focusing on symptom areas is helpful

Because you are so worried about your health and illness, it may be quite a challenge to realise and to accept that your real difficulty may be anxiety and that your anxieties are making your problem worse. This is a helpful experiment to test and challenge your beliefs that all physical sensations must be attended to as they are a sign that something is wrong and you will also discover that if we focus on any part of our body we will notice sensations that we may not have been aware of before, this is called symptom production;

Find a quiet space where you will not be interrupted and choose any part of your body, for example your right big toe, or your left calf and focus all of your attention on it for five minutes. After the five minutes are up write down any sensations that you noticed such as increased temperature or tingling for example. Make a note of whether the sensations became stronger or changed in any way. Now spend five minutes doing something completely different, for example tidying your room or writing a shopping list. At the end of the five minutes make a note of

what has happened to the physical sensations, have they become worse or better or disappeared completely ?

Most of us will find that we stop noticing the very real and normal physical sensations or that they are much less intense. Hopefully this experiment will show you that when we focus on any part of our body we become much more aware of the normal physical sensations that occur in all of our bodies and that they are nothing to worry about.

Adapting worrying thoughts about illness and health issues

As we identified earlier in Health Anxiety related vicious cycles our thoughts play a very important role in triggering and maintaining our worries about health, lowering our mood and in triggering the physical symptoms of anxiety. Therefore working with our thoughts is likely to be very helpful in reducing your anxieties and physical symptoms of anxiety. Firstly it is helpful to remember that thoughts are simply thoughts and they are not facts and that when we feel anxious our thoughts become anxious and we are much more likely to think the worst, this is called “catastrophising”. It is helpful to begin to notice negative thoughts about our health and to challenge them and adapt them to more helpful balanced thoughts. This exercise may take some practice initially but it is worth the effort and can reduce your anxiety significantly.

Here are some examples of typical negative thoughts, of people who have Health Anxiety, and some examples of adapted alternative and balanced thoughts

ANXIOUS THOUGHT / IMMAGE	BALANCED REALISTIC THOUGHT
There is cancer in my family, I must be alert to any signs or symptoms of this.	My GP has given me the all clear. Because I keep checking and worrying this is increasing my anxiety and is not helpful for me. Staying focused on my body stops me from enjoying other activities.
I have had a lot of headaches recently, it could a sign that I have a brain tumour, I will die.	I am coping with some stressful events at the moment which are increasing my anxiety. Headaches are often caused by stress and anxiety.
My pins and needles may be the sign of a serious illness, I must get this checked out by my GP and have tests and exploratory surgery.	We can never be 100% certain that we are in perfect health, having lots of tests may reassure me for a while but I know that my anxiety and worry will return. My pins and needles are probably part of my anxiety.
If I don't worry about my health then I am tempting fate.	Being superstitious about my health is not helping me and simply increases my anxiety and lowers my mood. The amount of time I spend worrying about my health is spoiling the quality of my life.

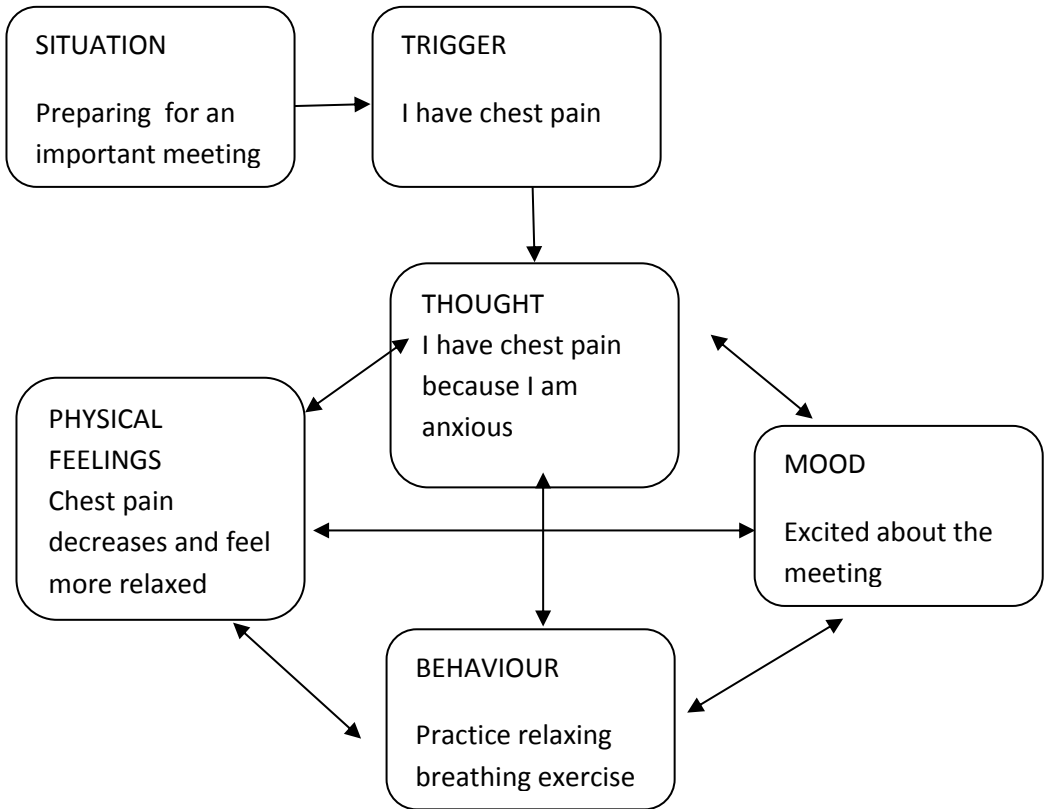
How does Health Anxiety affect my life?

Having health anxiety often means that we spend a great deal of time worrying about and focusing on our health and how we might cope if we do develop a serious illness. These thoughts and associated checking and safety behaviours often leave us feeling low and anxious and stop us from living a happy balanced life. You may need to practise the self-help exercises in this guide for a while before you start to feel better. If, after practicing these exercises you find that Health Anxiety is still interfering with your life you may wish to access further help from Let's Talk.

Can Health Anxiety be treated?

Yes. The National Institute for Clinical Evidence (NICE) who publish guidelines for treatments in the NHS recommend CBT for the treatment of health anxiety. CBT can help you to understand and to manage the relationship between Health Anxiety thoughts, behaviours, emotional feelings and physical sensations.

At Let's Talk we aim to help you to develop more positive ways of behaving, thinking and feeling.



What further help is available?

You can contact Let's Talk on 0800 073 2200.

Let's Talk is Gloucestershire's Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) service. We offer courses and one to one work where we can guide you in developing strategies like the ones discussed here, and we also offer CBT with a qualified therapist. CBT focuses on the 'here and now' and uses specific techniques to help you manage your symptoms. CBT encourages you to work on tasks between sessions to help you achieve your goals.

You can access our website on www.talk2gether.nhs.uk where you will find more information about your difficulties, and also our leaflets and questionnaires that we would like you to complete before you phone us.

The website contains other self-help guides for example "Improving sleep", "Managing unhelpful behaviours", and "Managing negative and unhelpful thinking using Cognitive Behaviour Therapy", as well as our workbook "Gaining Control of your Life – A self-help Workbook for managing Depression" and "Gaining Control of your Life with a baby"

If you suffer from anxiety you may find the self-help guide "Managing Stress and Anxiety using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques" helpful as well.

Alternatively you can speak to your GP, who can refer you and also give you a copy of the 'Introducing the Let's Talk Service' leaflet, which has our questionnaires on it.

Useful Books on Prescription

Let's Talk can provide you with a book prescription to take to your local library. You can then choose from a range of self-help books to borrow, which provide helpful information and step by step self-help techniques for managing common conditions, including health anxiety. These include:

- Overcoming Health Anxiety: Written by David Veale and Rob Wilson.
- Overcoming Anxiety: Written by Helen Kennerley.

Other Self-help Guides in the Let's Talk Service

Let's Talk Panic

Let's Talk Low Self Esteem

Let's Talk Health Anxiety

Let's Talk Social Anxiety

Let's Talk OCD

Let's Talk PTSD

Let's Talk Bereavement and Loss

Let's Talk Managing Negative Thinking

Let's Talk Getting Active

Useful websites

Let's Talk website: www.talk2gether.nhs.uk

Moodometer:

<http://www.2getherinclusion.nhs.uk/themoodometer.php>

Living Life to the Full website: <http://www.lltff.com/>

MoodGym: <https://moodgym.anu.edu.au/welcome>

Other helpful contacts:

Depression Alliance: www.depressionalliance.org

Call on 0845 123 23 20 to request their information pack or
email: information@depressionalliance.org

“Your Space” (Local support group for people suffering with
anxiety and depression)

To contact email: yourspaceglos@yahoo.co.uk

The Samaritans: www.samaritans.org

Call on 116 123; 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Mind: www.mind.org.uk

Info line: 0300 123 3393

Mental Health Helplines Partnership: www.mhhp.org.uk

The Royal College of Psychiatrists: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/info

Community Health Trainers, Gloucestershire

*(Community Health Trainers offer support, information and
guidance to people who want to make changes to their lifestyle
whatever their faith or culture)*

Email: gloshealth.trainers@independencetrust.co.uk

Website: www.gloshealthtrainers.nhs.uk **Tel:** 0845 863 83 23