

Paul's Fear of Cancer

Following the death of his father two years earlier, Paul, aged fifty-six, became preoccupied with the idea that he would develop bowel cancer. He had known one of his father's friends to have Multiple Sclerosis and had become particularly afraid of the way it seemed to come and go without warning, leaving more permanent damage behind each time. Paul spent at least five hours a day preoccupied with his health. He had become acutely tuned in to his body for any possible signs of disease. He was especially anxious about any feelings of discomfort in his stomach, but he would often worry about other physical sensations too, fearing they could be 'secondary' tumors. At times he would be afraid that he might develop cancer, and in his more acutely anxious moments he'd become convinced he had the disease. Paul would check his stools when he went to the toilet for any sign of blood or mucus, and would frequently feel unsure that what he was looking at was normal. He bought several 'home detection kits' for self-testing for bowel cancer, and would sometimes feel reassured for a short while, but often wondered how reliable the tests really were. He would spend hours each day on the Internet looking for symptoms of bowel cancer, looking for reassurance that he did not have his most feared illness. He would also research health foods and ways of avoiding environmental toxins in the hope that he could reduce his risk of serious illness.

A doctor had told Paul that his symptoms were caused by anxiety, but he remained anxious because he couldn't find the 100 per cent certainty he craved that he was not ill or going to become ill. He would use books and the Internet to check lists of anxiety symptoms if he did ever feel any physical sensations he was unsure of. He would make frequent trips to see his doctor, taking with him notes he'd made of the time, bodily location, intensity and duration of his physical sensations. He never felt reassured for very long, and would often ask his doctor for more tests and screening, but also would worry that he could have a form of cancer that wasn't readily picked up on tests. Paul knew that he was 'a bit of a hypochondriac' and started to worry that he would have a 'cry wolf' problem, in that he'd had so many 'false alarms' that his doctor wouldn't take him seriously if he really were ill. He decided that he would have to give his doctor as much information as possible and to insist on another referral to a specialist to prevent this from happening. However, he could see his doctor becoming stressed when he saw him, and it occurred to him that perhaps his doctor knew he was ill and was too afraid to tell.

Paul's wife worked as a schoolteacher and had come to dread checking her telephone messages at break times because there would inevitably be a message from Paul desperate to speak to her for reassurance. In the evenings Paul began to drink excessive amounts of alcohol to reduce his anxiety, but this put further strain on his marriage.

Defining Health Anxiety

Health anxiety is a condition that consists of either a pre-occupation with having a serious illness or a fear of developing a serious illness, despite medical reassurance that this is not an issue. Only a health professional can diagnose whether or not you have health anxiety, but if you answer yes to the following questions, then you probably have health anxiety.

Do You have Health Anxiety?

1. Have you been preoccupied with having or developing a serious illness for at least six months?
2. Have you had repeated reassurance from a doctor that you are not suffering from a serious disease?
3. Does your preoccupation with your health cause you great distress? Or does your preoccupation interfere in areas of life such as work or family and social life?
4. Do you repeatedly check your symptoms on the Internet or in books, examine yourself or ask others for reassurance?

Source: 'Overcoming Health Anxiety: A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques' (2009) by David Veale and Rob Willson