

Focusing more on what's important to you, and less on health

Much of health anxiety is the result of becoming overly focused on:

- your own health
- other people's health
- health in the media, or
- the place of health, illness and death in our culture.

The aim of the next exercise is to gain an understanding of your values or what you want your life to stand for. This will enable you to engage in a life that has a better balance and is less dominated by health. Once you know what your valued directions are, you can start moving towards them. To help you monitor whether you are in fact acting according to your values, we have prepared various tables and exercises for you to work through. There are various prompts for each area where you can write down a brief statement. You don't have to fill in a values statement for every area; just leave an area blank if you think it is inappropriate for you. After writing down your statements, you may want to clarify them with a friend or therapist. Be careful not to write down values that you think you should have just because others will approve of them. Only write down what you know to be true for yourself. It is probably a valued direction if you acted on it consistently before you experienced your health anxiety. If you have had a health

anxiety for many years, you may struggle with this exercise, but you should persevere because it is very important.

Note that values are not goals – they are more like compass points and they need to be lived out through committed action. Goals are part of the process of committing yourself to action. Goals are achievable – for example, you can get married, which is one goal – whereas values are more open-ended: with values, you never reach your destination because there is always something more you can do to work towards them, such as being a good partner. If your valued direction in life is to be a good parent, then your first goal might be to spend a few hours just hanging out with your son or daughter and playing with him or her. Other goals might be to get your son or daughter through school or college as part of the valued direction of being a good parent. This does not mean you will not fail at times – it means that if and when you fail, you can learn from it, take responsibility and restart your commitment to the action. It might take some time to discover all your values, so here are some prompts to help you:

- Imagine what aspects of life you would be engaging in if you were not feeling anxious or preoccupied with your health at this moment. We understand that you may feel upset at the things you seem to have lost, but this exercise will help you chart your course on the journey you wish to take.

- Brainstorm all the activities and interests you can think of, and consider which might be close to your valued directions.
- Remind yourself of what you used to value or aspire to when you were younger. Have any of these values simply been 'squashed' by your health anxiety?
- Consider whether a fear of what other people will think, or a fear of failing, might be holding you back from pursuing your valued directions.
- Consider a role model or hero and the values he or she holds.
- Have a chat with a trusted friend (or therapist) who knows you well and see what he or she would guess your values to be.
- Be prepared to experiment and 'try on for size', living consistently with a given valued direction to see how it 'fits'.

SAMPLE VALUED DIRECTIONS FORM

Area	Valued direction
1 Intimacy (What is important to you in how you act in an intimate relationship? What sort of partner do you want to be? If you are not involved in a relationship at present, how would you like to act in a relationship?)	<i>I want to develop a relationship and be a good partner and spend time doing things together.</i>
2 Family relationships (What is important to you in how you want to act as a brother/sister; son/daughter; father/mother or parent-in-law? If you are not in contact with some of your family members, would you like to be and how would you act in such a relationship?)	<i>I'd like to be a good daughter and less dependent on my parents for support and to help them more in the future. I'd like to spend more time with my brother, getting to know him better.</i>
3 Social relationships (What is important to you in the way you act in the friendships you have? How would you like your friends to remember you? If you have no friends, would you like to have some and what role would you like in a friendship?)	<i>I'd like to be a good friend, more open and available to my friends.</i>
4 Work (What is important to you in your work? What sort of employee do you want to be? How important to you is what you achieve in your career? What sort of business do you want to run?)	<i>I'd like to return to work and be more approachable and help to make it a more successful company.</i>
5 Education and training (What is important to you in your education or training? What sort of student do you want to be? If you are not in education, would you like to be?)	<i>To improve my future prospects of securing a better job in the future, I'd like to do more management and IT training.</i>

Area**Valued direction**

6 Recreation (What is important to you in what you do to follow any interests, sports or hobbies? If you are not following any interests, what would you ideally like to be pursuing?)

I'd like to get back to playing tennis and swimming. I might like to learn to play a musical instrument.

7 Spirituality (If you are spiritual, what is important to you in the way you want to follow a spiritual path? If you are not, would you like to be and what do you ideally want?)

I'd like to learn more about Buddhism.

8 Voluntary work (What would you like to do for the larger community? For example, voluntary or charity work or political activity?)

I'd like to do more to help others in a charity for health anxiety or for obsessive compulsive disorder and raise money for them.

9 Health/physical well-being (What is important to you in how you act for your physical health?)

Eating a healthy diet and taking exercise.

10 Mental health (What is important to you generally in how you look after your mental health?)

I'd like to be better at managing my stress at the end of the working day.