

When problematic solutions seem to work

There are two steps in maintaining health anxiety. The first is the way you may be habitually interpreting normal sensations (like dizziness, tiredness) as evidence of a severe illness. The second step in understanding how health anxiety is maintained is understanding the way that some your attempts to relieve yourself of anxiety are the very things that are keeping it going.

My solutions are the problem is a phrase we very much want you to keep in mind when you consider what is keeping your health anxiety going. By this we mean that we hope you'll come to understand that the strategies you've come to use to try to reduce your uncertainty and anxiety about your health are fuelling your worry. They are very understandable ways of coping with intrusive thoughts about a health problem.

All the following solutions might appear to work at first in that they reduce anxiety in the short term. Their aim is to increase the feeling of certainty and influence over events. Yet while you may feel that they are working at first, gradually they increase preoccupation and distress. They can produce new sensations, fuel doubt, and increase the sense of feeling out of control.

'The solution is the problem'		
WORRY	WAY OF COPING	UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES
I have AIDS	Getting more information on the Internet	Increases doubt and uncertainty; generates more questions to research
I have stomach cancer	Seeking more medical opinions and investigations	Makes the concern seem more real; increases doubt; generates more false trails; makes me less able to tolerate doubt
I have a brain tumour	Self-reassurance	Increases doubt and uncertainty; generates more questions to research
I'm going to have a heart attack	Reviewing past reassurances	Increases my preoccupation and doubt and makes me less interested in my values
Thoughts of illness and death	Trying to push the thoughts out of my mind	Increases the number of distressing thoughts. Makes them more intrusive and I cannot generate new information
I'm going to die of breast cancer	Try to replace bad thoughts with happy thoughts	Increases the number of distressing thoughts. Makes them more intrusive and I cannot generate new information
I'm going to get a degenerative nerve disease from toxic chemicals	Avoiding or escaping from new or threatening situations or activities	Cannot generate new information; increases my fear of illness; feel more depressed as I come to realize that avoidance does not work

Behavioural Experiment

You might well be sceptical about this 'solutions are the problem' idea since naturally you've been trying to help yourself, and much of what you've done is only common sense.

Take reassurance, for example. Doctors are in fact trained to give reassurance so it seems reasonable for them to give it and for you to seek it — right? Except that health anxiety by definition is a preoccupation that persists despite medical reassurance. This means:

That it's crucial you try treating your problem as if it's a worry about a health problem rather than an actual or possible health problem.

If you are not convinced that safety behaviours make things worse, try a 'real-life' Behavioral experiment.

1. Spend one day dealing with your health anxiety the usual way, and record the degree of distress and amount of time you spent in that day preoccupied with your health anxiety.
2. Spend the next day increasing the frequency and duration of a safety behaviour or double it if you can.
3. The following day, go back to your usual way.

Take a look at the results of your three-day experiment. What do you make of them? Most people discover that the harder they try to seek reassurance, or increase their checking, the worse their preoccupation and feelings about their health are.