

A Practical Approach to Overcoming Illness Anxiety

CE webinar by Dr. Danny Zamir

Overview

- What is illness anxiety
- Impact of illness anxiety
- Cause of illness anxiety
- Conceptualization of illness anxiety including how it is maintained
- Assessment
- Treatment
- Covid-19 and illness anxiety
- Effectiveness of illness anxiety treatment
- Stress management
- Case Study
- Medications
- Key points for people with illness anxiety
- Resources



Poll #1

What brings you to this webinar?

- 1: I have illness anxiety and want to learn how to overcome it.
- 2: I am a therapist and want to learn how to treat illness anxiety.
- 3: I was interested in learning about the topic.

Poll #2

How familiar are you with illness anxiety?

1: I have a high level of knowledge about illness anxiety

2: I have some knowledge about illness anxiety

3: I have little knowledge about illness anxiety

What is illness anxiety?

- DSM 5 criteria

- A: **Preoccupation** with having or acquiring a serious illness
- B: Somatic symptoms are not present or, if present, are only mild in intensity. If another medical condition is present or there is a high risk for developing a medical condition (e.g., strong family history is present), the **preoccupation is clearly excessive** or disproportionate.
- C: There is a high level of anxiety about health, and the individual is easily alarmed about personal health status.
- D: The individual performs **excessive health-related behaviors** (e.g., repeatedly checks his or her body for signs of illness) or exhibits maladaptive avoidance (e.g., avoids doctor appointments and hospitals).
- E: Illness preoccupation has been present for at least 6 months, but the specific illness that is feared may change over that period of time.

What is illness anxiety?

- F. The illness-related preoccupation is not better explained by another mental disorder, such as somatic symptom disorder, panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, body dysmorphic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or delusional disorder, somatic type.
- **Somatic symptom disorder** is similar, except that there is a significant somatic symptom that is present and the reaction to that symptom and concern about one's health is excessive
- Illness anxiety is also known as health anxiety or hypochondriasis, but these terms are more broad.

Key Features of illness anxiety

- Preoccupation with having a disease due to a misinterpretation of physical symptoms
- Fear continues despite medical testing and reassurance from medical professionals
- The person is aware (at least at times) that the fear isn't entirely reasonable
- Not exclusively focused on physical appearance as in body dysmorphic disorder

(Owens, K, and Antony, M., 2011)

Impact of illness anxiety

- Approximately 3.4% of the population
- Medically unexplained symptoms account for 25-50% of all primary care visits
- Severely distressing and debilitating
- 10-20% of total medical costs in the United States costing over \$250 billion per year (Barsky, Orav, and Bates, 2005)
- Use 41-78% more healthcare than people with diagnosed medical conditions
- Prevalence increasing in recent years (partially fueled by cyberchondria) (Axelson and Hedman-lagerlof, 2019)

Internet searches

<https://www.webmd.com/pain-management/guide/whats-causing-my-chest-pain>

<https://www.healthline.com/health/eye-health/sudden-blurred-vision>

<https://www.webmd.com/women/features/why-so-tired-10-causes-fatigue>

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/lightheaded-top-5-reasons-you-might-feel-woozy>



Cause of illness anxiety

- Caused by a combination of genetics and environmental factors (Moderately heritable)
- Tendency to worry, anxiety sensitivity
- Triggering event



Conceptualization of illness anxiety

- **Cognitive features**

- **Disease conviction**
- Disease preoccupation
- **Difficulty accepting reassurance**
- Resist the idea that their issue is psychological in nature
- **Body monitoring**

(Taylor and Asmundson, 2004)



Conceptualization of illness anxiety

- **Behavioral Features**

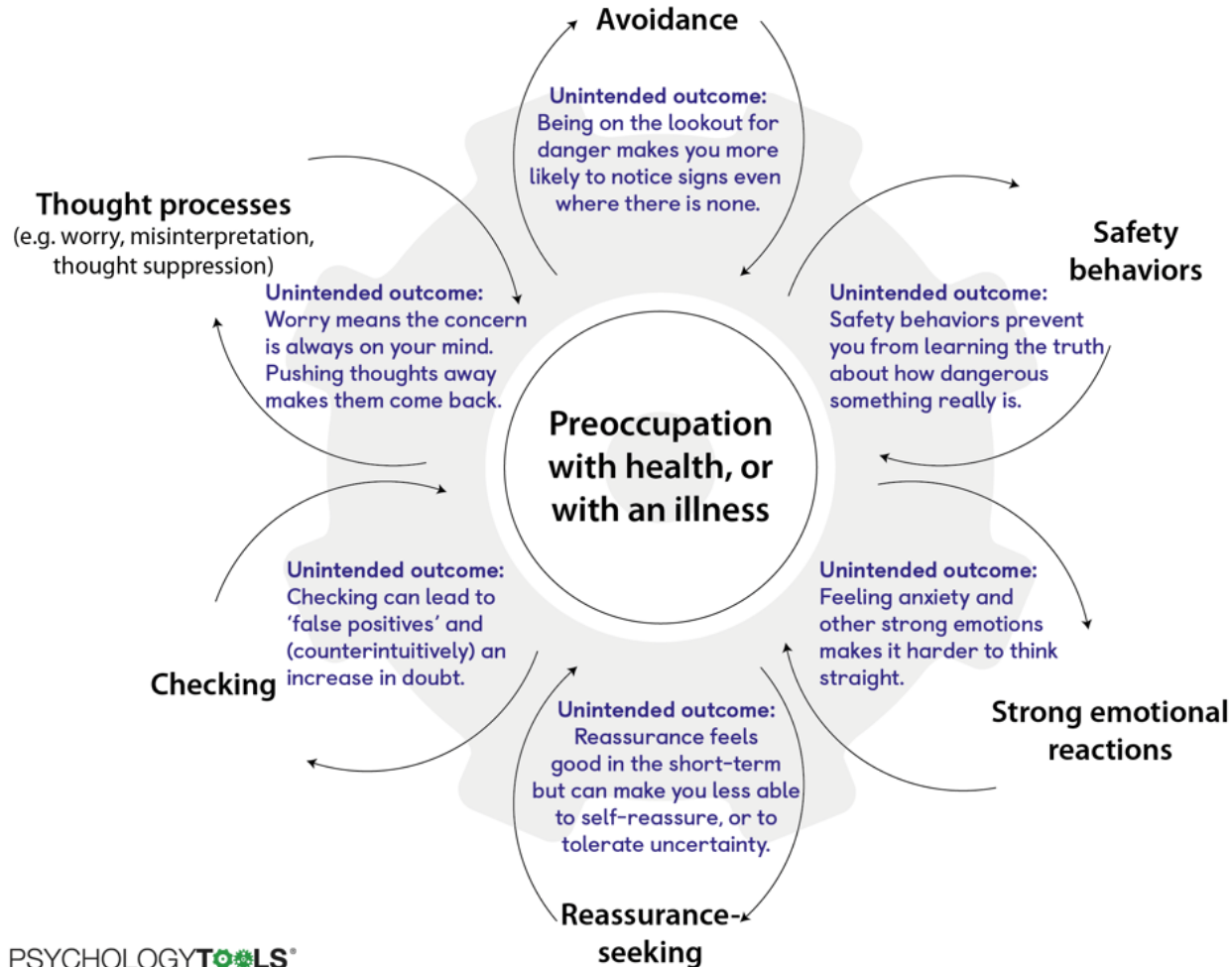
- Checking
- **Reassurance seeking**
- Seeking unnecessary testing and treatment
- Doctor shopping
- **Internet searching**
- **Avoiding reminders of disease**

(Taylor and Asmundson, 2004)



Maintenance of illness anxiety

- **Overmonitor** physiological symptoms and benign changes leading to **catastrophic misinterpretations**
- Symptoms of anxiety mistaken for proof of illness
- Iatrogenic symptoms
- Fear of illness leads people to engage in behaviors (reassurance seeking, avoidance, testing etc.) that reduce their anxiety in the moment, but that increase their anxiety over time (**Reinforcement**)
- Internet searches maintain catastrophic beliefs (**Cyberchondria**)
- Thought suppression backfires



Poll #3

Have you experienced increased anxiety about your health during the covid-19 pandemic?

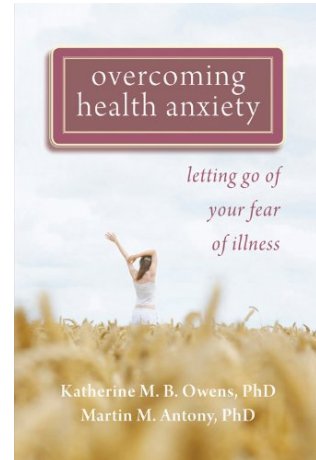
Covid-19 and illness anxiety



- Overall increase in depression, insomnia, and anxiety
- For many people, this might be their triggering event
- Health anxiety and cyberchondria were risk factors for developing anxiety about covid-19. Believing that you were informed about the pandemic and adaptive emotion regulation served as a buffer against virus anxiety (Jungmann and Witthöft, 2020)
- People with health anxiety may have had more fear and worry about contacting covid-19 and more preoccupation with the potential consequences of infection (Cannito, L., Di Crosta, A., Palumbo, R. *et al.*, 2020)

Assessment of illness anxiety

- Clinical and medical history (Get charts if possible)
- Triggering events
- Beliefs about their symptoms
- Stress Level
- Cultural Factors: Beliefs about illness and trust of medical providers
- Strength of disease conviction



Assessment of illness anxiety

- “What have you tried so far to solve this problem?”
- Cognitive avoidance strategies
- Anxiety maintaining behaviors (Internet searches, reassurance seeking, doctor shopping, checking, etc.)
- Assessment measures: (Illness Behavior Questionnaire, Health Anxiety Questionnaire, and the Somatosensory Amplification Scale)
- Develop a conceptualization and share this

Treatment of illness anxiety

- Historical belief that it was untreatable
- Cognitive behavioral therapy is highly effective in treating illness anxiety as it targets the mechanisms that lead to anxiety in the first place (Axelsson, E., & Hedman-Lagerlöf, E., 2019).

Treatment of illness anxiety

- CBT targets cognitions that lead to preoccupation with illness directly
- CBT also address behaviors that reinforce and maintain illness anxiety
- Exposure exercises reduce avoidance, increase tolerance of uncomfortable sensations, and help people to test their beliefs related to illness
- ACT is also effective (Eilenberg, Fink, Jensen, Rief, and Frostholt, 2015)

CBT for illness anxiety

- Rapport building and engagement
- Amplify ambivalence (Motivational Interviewing)
- Cognitive restructuring
- Behavioral experiments

Treatment Alliance:
Replace short-term relief from the safety behavior with empathy, patience, and understanding from providers, family, friends

Temporary relief

Thoughts about being sick

Cognitive therapy:
Challenge thoughts, reduce body vigilance and catastrophic misinterpretation, reduce focus on medications, alter core health beliefs, learn about normal sensations

The cycle of illness anxiety

Behavioral therapy:
Replace the avoidance and reassurance-seeking with adaptive coping skills and problem-solving

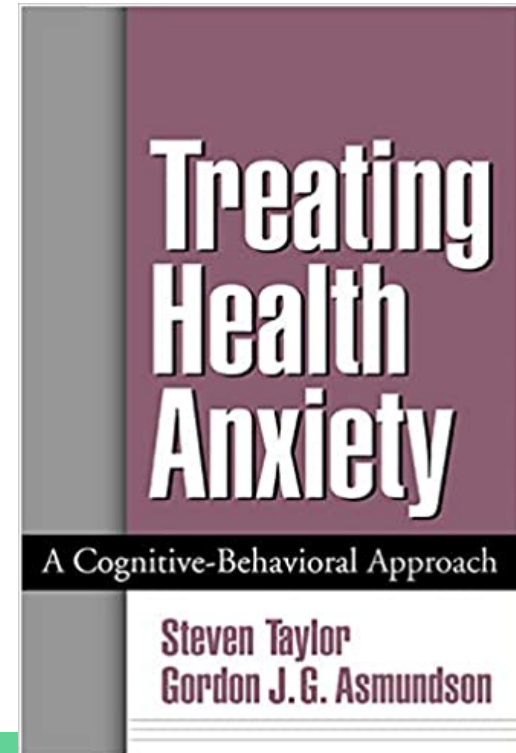
Avoidance
OR
Seeking Reassurance

Anxiety

Exposure therapy:
Experience anxiety in a controlled environment to practice distress tolerance and reduce anxiety sensitivity

CBT for illness anxiety

- Eliminate reinforcing behaviors (Reassurance seeking, checking, avoidance, internet searching, etc.)
- Exposure with response prevention (Worry exposure)
- Psychoeducation about the physiological symptoms of anxiety
- Interoceptive exposure
- Develop acceptance of uncertainty



Stress management

- Mindfulness
- Breathing retraining
- PMR



Effectiveness

Systematic review and meta-analysis of the available literature and included 19 randomized controlled trials with post-treatment outcome data from a total of 2008 participants.

“In relation to control conditions, CBT leads to large reductions of health anxiety and ...we estimate that two-thirds of participants in CBT respond to treatment and about half are in remission post-treatment. We also found that the effect of CBT on health anxiety is sustained at longer-term follow-up... This comprehensive review of the available research adds to the body of knowledge showing that CBT is highly effective in the treatment of health anxiety.”

(Axelsson, E., & Hedman-Lagerlöf, E., 2019)

Effectiveness

- Average of 10.6 sessions
- Results were maintained at 18 month follow-up
- “CBT was found to be superior to pill placebo in one trial and to another psychological treatment (behavioral stress management and short-term psychodynamic psychotherapy) in two trials”(Axelsson, E., & Hedman-Lagerlöf, E., 2019)

Managing medical care

- Developing trust
- Primary care model (one medical professional directing treatment)
- Avoiding excessive testing and treatment (disclose IA diagnosis)
- Responding to reassurance seeking
- Planned appointments at reasonable intervals
- Develop criteria for seeking medical care



Case Study

- 35 year old, white, male, married, with 2 children
- Extremely high stress level
- Triggering event: family member died suddenly of a heart attack when he was a child
- Additional trigger: Likely contracted covid-19 6 months before coming for treatment, which led to distressing physical symptoms including pain in his throat
- History of panic attacks since high school, which worsened 1 year before he started treatment, when he developed panic disorder and illness anxiety disorder
- Referred by his primary care doctor for severe health anxiety
- Physiological symptoms include: difficulty swallowing, fatigue, muscle aches, cramps, tingling in extremities, jaw pain, high blood pressure, and twitching of muscles
- Lots of doctors, lots of tests. Multiple EKGs

Case Study

- Belief that he has an extremely uncommon and severe neurological condition
- Symptom checking, strong belief conviction, reassurance seeking, excessive medical testing, overwhelming preoccupation, unable to work, impacting his family, using alcohol to cope, lots of internet searching
- Avoidance of exercise
- Belief that he has symptoms that are unobservable to medical providers
- Good relationship with his primary care doctor

Case Study: Treatment

- Validation, empathy, and rapport building
- Psychoeducation about panic attacks, health anxiety, and physiological symptoms of anxiety
- Building a sense of doubt of his assessment
- Cognitive restructuring (Identifying beliefs and assessing their validity, asking about percentages)
- Received medical records indicating that his primary care doctor was unconcerned
- Set goals around eliminating internet searching, reducing alcohol use, and decreasing reassurance seeking behaviors

Case Study: Treatment

- Encouraged physical exercise as interoceptive exposure
- Engaged in hyperventilating as interoceptive exposure
- Worry exposure in session and assigned as homework
- Mindfulness training, acceptance of uncertainty, and PMR
- Final tests indicated no indication of neurological condition or any other health problem
- Relapse prevention
- Total: 10 sessions, gradual decrease in distress and dramatic relief after 6 sessions

Medications

- As of 2018, there were no medications approved specifically for the treatment of illness anxiety.
- SSRIs lots of research for anxiety and some for health anxiety (Owens and Antony, 2011)
- SNRIs effective for panic disorder, GAD, and OCD.
- Benzodiazepines can reinforce avoidance, increase anxiety sensitivity, and cause both side effects and severe withdrawal symptoms
- Buspar used for GAD. Well tolerated.
- Effects of CBT appear to be more long lasting than the effects of medication. (Owens and Antony, 2011)

Key steps for people with illness anxiety

- Question your assumptions and examine your beliefs
- Find a doctor who you trust and talk openly with them about your anxiety
- Avoid internet searches
- Work on becoming comfortable with physiological activation

Key steps for people with illness anxiety

- Use external focus to get out of the habit of looking for symptoms
- Focus on improving health in ways that you can control and work to accept uncertainty and what is out of your control (Serenity prayer)
- If health anxiety is causing you significant distress or impairing your life, seek out a therapist who has expertise in treating health anxiety and ideally someone who practice ACT or CBT

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Tyrer, P., & Tyrer, H. (2018). Health anxiety: Detection and treatment. *BJPsych Advances*, 24(1), 66-72. doi:10.1192/bja.2017.5 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bjpsych-advances/article/health-anxiety-detection-and-treatment/093F59B8FF7844551733E49DFBD75BFB>

Resources

<https://www.psychologytools.com/self-help/health-anxiety/>

https://www.abebooks.com/Overcoming-Health-Anxiety-Letting-Fear-Illness/30907991963/bd?cm_mmc=ggl- -US Shopp Textbook- -naa- -naa&gclid=CjwKCAjwnPOEBhA0EiwA609ReUEat3stajtV6vahVYU51e-jABc5zty6H0aceNMtjSTzcxXt9pjJ3xoCOYIQAvD_BwE

<https://www.amazon.com/Treating-Health-Anxiety-Cognitive-Behavioral-Approach/dp/1572309989>

<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/hypochondria-and-covid-19#support>

psychologytoday.com/us/blog/liberate-yourself/202102/4-behavior-changes-combat-health-anxiety?fbclid=IwAR2MPZ6JmahJLV-x51vwHMmpvVkxAB9X4TlqB7khYcdMSM4276tHMtjDSrk

Resources continued

<https://palousemindfulness.com/>

<https://caps.sa.ucsb.edu/resources/relaxation-resources>

<https://positivepsychology.com/cbt-cognitive-behavioral-therapy-techniques-worksheets/>