

Helping Health Anxiety

Module 9

Healthy Living & Self-Management Planning

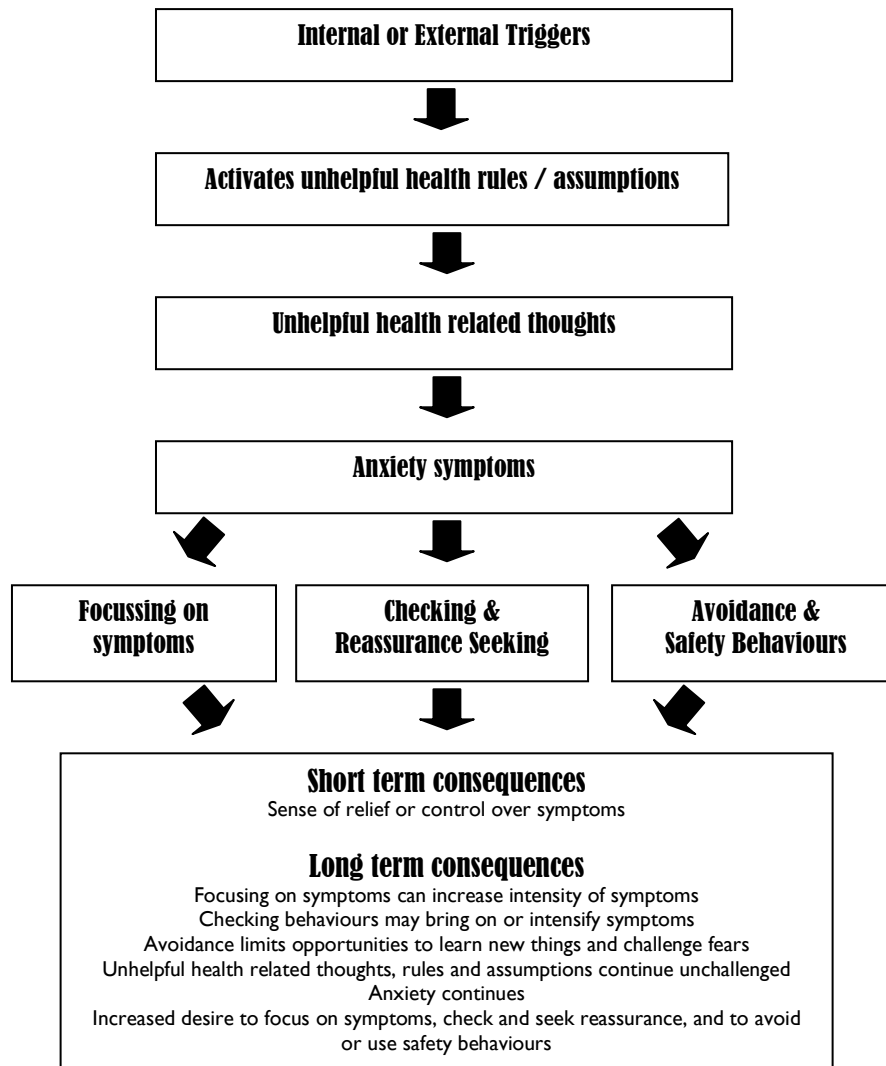
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Introduction

Congratulations on making it to the end of this information package! In this final module, you will find a summary of all of the important concepts and strategies introduced to you in the previous modules. You will also find a self-management plan designed to help you stay on track in the future.

The Health Anxiety Model Revisited

Remember the model of how health anxiety is maintained from Module 3? It showed how certain internal or external triggers can activate your health rules or assumptions. Once activated, these rules and assumptions can negatively affect the way you think about your health and interpret health related information. The more you think in this negative manner, the more anxious you feel, and the stronger your desire is to focus on your symptoms, check and seek reassurance, and avoid things that remind you of your health related concerns. Engaging in these behaviours may provide some short term sense of relief or control. However, in the long term, the vicious cycle remains unchallenged and continues each time you are confronted with a trigger. Below is a simplified model to refresh your memory.



A New Way of Operating

The old health anxiety model represents a vicious cycle, where the things that you think and do actually increase the amount you worry about your health, and the frequency and intensity of physical sensations you experience. The good thing about a cycle is that you can reverse it from a negative cycle to a more positive cycle. It is like a wheel moving in one direction that has some momentum behind it. By making some changes and putting some force against the old motion, you can usually get it to spin in the opposite direction. Initially, trying to change the direction of the wheel can be a real effort and may not be smooth at first. However, with some persistence it starts to get easier and the wheel eventually gathers its own momentum in the new direction.

We hope that by now you have been able to start loosening up the old health anxiety cycle. So let's take a moment to review the key strategies introduced throughout these modules, and see how they might fit together in a new model (see page 4).

Notice in the new model, that internal or external triggers can still activate your old unhelpful health rules and assumptions. This is because those unhelpful rules and assumptions have generally been around for a long time, so you can't expect them to disappear overnight. The key thing is that instead of allowing these unhelpful rules and assumptions to then guide your thoughts, feelings and behaviours, you choose to do things differently. Over time these old rules and assumptions may then fade out and not be so easily activated.

So, when your old health rules and assumption are activated you instead:

- **Adjust your health rules and assumptions** by challenging them, devising new helpful health rules and assumptions, and putting them into practice;
- **Let go of your focus on health symptoms and worries** by practicing your attention exercises (mundane task focussing, meditation), and using your postponement strategy to delay any further focussing on these to a later time and place;
- **Re-evaluate any unhelpful health related thoughts** by using a thought diary during your "worry period" to address any thoughts that keep popping back up;
- **Reduce any unhelpful checking or reassurance seeking behaviours** by evaluating how helpful the old behaviour really is, generating a new more helpful behaviour, and then testing it out;
- **Reduce any avoidance or safety behaviours** by gradually confronting feared thoughts, people, places and activities.

Doing each of these things, although sometimes hard in the short term, can lead to a range of long term benefits. The key thing is to keep going, because the more of the above strategies you use, the more likely you are to reverse that old cycle of health anxiety.



My New Way of Operating

Internal or External Triggers



Activates unhelpful health rules / assumptions

INSTEAD



INSTEAD

Adjust unhelpful health rules / assumptions

Ask myself:
 Where did it come from? Why is it still here?
 What impact does it have on my life?
 How is it unreasonable, unrealistic or unhelpful?
 What is an alternative rule / assumption?
 How can I put this into practice?



Let go of my focus on health symptoms and worries

Practice my attention exercises (i.e., mundane task focussing and meditation)

Use postponement to delay any further focussing on these until a specific later time and place

Re-evaluate unhelpful health related thoughts

If I am still worrying when I get to my worry period, use a thought diary to directly challenge the worry and develop more realistic predictions



Reduce Checking & Reassurance Seeking

Ask myself:
 How helpful is my checking/reassurance seeking?
 What are the advantages / disadvantages?
 Should I decrease, postpone or eliminate this?
 What specifically will I do instead? Why?

Test out this new behaviour

Reduce Avoidance & Safety Behaviours

Gradually start to confront feared thoughts, people, places and activities

Be aware of and try to gradually decrease any safety behaviours I am using



Short term consequences

- Initial increase in anxiety, discomfort and uncertainty

Long term consequences

- Less worry and concern about symptoms and general well-being
- Less chance of bringing on physical symptoms of anxiety
- Less chance of creating new symptoms due to checking behaviours
- More opportunities and confidence to be able to respond appropriately to health problems that arise
- Less time spent checking, reassurance seeking, or avoiding
- Improved relationships with friends, family, and health professionals
- More time for other important or enjoyable activities

Preventing Set-backs

Now that you have made it to the end of this information package, the most important thing is to keep going! It is important to recognise though, that even if you are trying your hardest to put all of the strategies in place, you can expect some set-backs to happen along the way. Change is never a straight-forward process.

Think about the idea of trying to learn a new sport. It will take some time for the skills to feel more natural and to learn all the new rules. You will need to persist and practice to make it easier on yourself. At times, you may come up against some tough competition, but that doesn't mean that you should give up! It just means that you might need some more practice.



Try not to focus too much on any set-backs that you experience. Instead, focus your attention on what you will do next to get back on track, such as practicing the strategies summarised by the “My New Way of Operating” model. You can even use any set-backs you experience as a way of learning something new about yourself, to help avoid similar problems in the future.

It may be helpful to create a personalised self-management plan to recognise the signs of a set-back and to put things in place as soon as possible. This way you can prevent a small set-back from turning into a large one.

On the next page is a self-management plan worksheet for you to identify:

- **Early warning signs of a set-back.** These are clues you can keep watch for that indicate you might be starting to worry about your health again.
- **Potential problem situations.** These are the things that could potentially trigger off another episode of health anxiety in the future.

By being aware of these early signs and potential triggers, you will be in a better position to “spot” the onset of health anxiety, and then take early action to prevent it from becoming worse.

There is also room for you to record helpful:

- **Strategies or techniques.** These are the things you have learnt that are helpful for reducing your health anxiety.
- **Coping statements or phrases.** These could include your new health rules or assumptions, ideas you have developed from your thought diaries, or any other things you have found helpful to remind yourself of from these modules.



Self-Management Plan

What are the early warning signs that tell me I might be heading for a set-back and need to do something about it myself? (e.g. particular thoughts, behaviours such as checking or avoidance, things others say to me, anxiety symptoms)

What situations are potential problems for me? (e.g. times of increased stress, medical check-ups, receiving a diagnosis)

What strategies/techniques have I learned that I could apply when I notice some early warning signs?

What are some of the coping statements or helpful phrases that I can use to help myself cope when I am feeling anxious or worried, or have had a set back?

Healthy Living

You might recall that right back at the start of Module 1, we discussed the idea that ‘health’ does not just refer to the absence of disease, injury or illness. Rather, ‘health’ often refers to a person’s state of physical, mental and social functioning. The final step to overcoming health anxiety is therefore to think about how you might improve those areas. After all, if you are taking real steps to improve your overall health, it gives you less to worry about!

On the next page, you will see that there is room to write in your ideas about a variety of ways you might improve your overall health. We recommend that rather than setting an overall goal, that you are specific with what you will actually do. For example, you might look at the “diet” box and think that you would like to eat more healthily. To get this started you could write “I will buy fresh fruit and vegetables with my shopping”.

Below are some questions that might help you identify whether you need to do something to improve each area on the *Healthy Living Worksheet*. We have also provided an example of how to set a specific goal for that area.

- Social activities and support: Do you need to catch up with old friends? Do you need to initiate some new friendships? *“I will call Jane this week to catch up for coffee”*
- Stress management: Is there too much stress in your life at the moment? How could you reduce it? *“I will join a Tuesday yoga class and leave work on time to get there”*
- Diet: Are you eating a nutritional and balanced diet? Are there any problem areas with your diet? *“I will cut back to one coffee per day this week”*
- Exercise: How often do you exercise? Do you need to do more or less exercise? *“I will walk the dog two mornings per week instead of letting my partner do it”*
- Pleasant or fun activities: Do you have enough fun in your life? Are there things you used to enjoy that you have cut back on or stopped doing? Do you put ‘fun’ last on the priority list? *“I am going to buy and start a jigsaw this Thursday”*
- Sleep: Are you getting enough rest? Do you find it hard to get to sleep or stay asleep? Do you put off going to sleep because you are doing other things? Do you have good sleep habits? *“I will take the TV out of the bedroom because I keep staying up later than I ought to”*
- Personal goals: Is there anything you would like to achieve that you need to start working on? What are your short, medium and long term goals? What is on your ‘to do’ list? Of all the things on your ‘to do’ list, which would you most like to achieve? What clear step could you take towards this goal? *“I will visit my relatives more often, starting with a visit to my Aunt this Saturday”*
- Other: Is there anything else that you could do that would improve your overall health? Do you need to reduce your alcohol intake? Are you due for a check up with your dentist or doctor? If you have been recommended a medication or other treatment programme, are you maintaining it? If not, how will you maintain it? *“I will call my dentist to book a check up”*



You may find that you have identified quite a few changes that you would like to make. You may want to get a diary so that you can schedule in each of these activities and keep track of how you are going with meeting your new goals.

Social Activities & Support

Stress Management

Diet

Exercise

Healthy



Pleasant or Fun Activities

Sleep

Living

Personal Goals

Other

Module Summary

- To reverse the vicious cycle of health anxiety you need to:
 - Adjust your health rules and assumptions
 - Let go of your focus on worrisome symptoms
 - Re-evaluate any unhelpful health related thoughts
 - Reduce any unhelpful checking or reassurance seeking behaviours
 - Reduce any avoidance or safety behaviours
- Changing your health related rules, thoughts and behaviours takes time and lots of practice
- Expect set-backs, but rather than focussing on them use your self-management plan to recognise them early, prevent them from getting worse, and get back on track.
- Engage in behaviours that promote your overall health, such as accessing social support, managing your stress levels, having a healthy and balanced diet, exercising regularly, having fun, getting enough sleep, setting and achieving personal goals, limiting your alcohol intake, attending regular check-ups, and managing any health issues you have.



To finish up ...

Congratulations! You have made it to the end of the modules. We hope you have found them to be beneficial and that you will maintain the gains you have made. Do keep using the strategies and review the modules from time to time. Good luck!

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for health anxiety is based on the approach that health anxiety is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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