

What Keeps Health Anxiety Going?

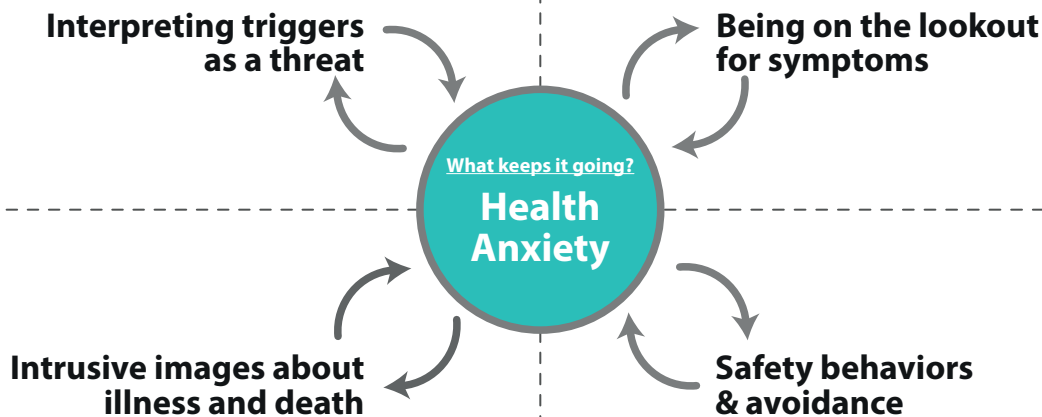


People who suffer from health anxiety tend to interpret triggers as threats to their health. Triggers might include:

- Body sensations (e.g. pain, fatigue).
- Changes in appearance.
- Changes in body function.
- Information about health risks.
- Being near ill people.

Being in the habit of interpreting the world as a threat can leave you blind to more likely and less threatening possibilities. Treatment for health anxiety involves testing your beliefs about danger and your health.

If someone told you there was an escaped tiger in your neighborhood, you would probably keep a lookout when you were out and about. It's the same for body sensations that you think are dangerous, especially those that you think could be signs of an impending catastrophe. The problem with always being on the lookout is that you're more likely to notice things. Even harmless body sensations can set off a 'false alarm' and trigger anxiety.



most people with health anxiety have powerful unwanted images that play in their minds. The images are often about:

- Suffering or dying from a serious or life-threatening illness.
- Being told 'the bad news' that you have a life-threatening illness.
- The impact of own death or serious illness on people you love.

Psychologists know that mental images can cause the same feelings as facing the 'real thing', so intrusive images can keep your anxiety going. Understandably, people often respond to these images by distracting themselves, or pushing them away – but unfortunately this tends to mean the images keep coming back.

Safety-seeking behaviors are the things that you do to prevent feared threats from hurting you. People with health anxiety often engage in:

- Avoidance (e.g. hospitals, sick people, mentally ill people).
- Checking (e.g. your body, memory, vision).
- Seeking reassurance (e.g. from health professionals, from the Internet).
- Distraction or suppressing thoughts.

The problem is that safety behaviors can prevent you from learning how safe your feared situations truly are, how capable you are of managing risks, or how to live with uncertainty.