

## COVID-19: Health Anxiety

### What is Health Anxiety?

According to Anxiety UK.org “Health anxiety is an anxiety condition that is often housed within the Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) spectrum of disorders. Those affected by health anxiety have an obsessional preoccupation with the idea that they are currently (or will be) experiencing a physical illness.”

People who have health anxiety/illness are often convinced that any physical symptom they may be experiencing means that they are ill and have a very serious illness such as cancer for example. If a person has a chest infection, because of the tightening in the chest they may believe that they are having a heart attack.

They may turn to the internet to look up any symptom they are experiencing and, from what they read, convince themselves they are very ill indeed. A severe headache is not just a headache or even a migraine, but a brain tumour.

We need to remember that anxiety is quite normal and we all experience it. It is part of our fight and flight response and is there to be triggered when we are in possible danger, or under threat.

A disorder differs from normal anxiety in the following ways

- It is more severe
- It is long lasting
- It interferes with the persons work or relationships

The main symptom of Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is overwhelming anxiety and worries which are commonly about things that can go wrong; for example money, health, family and work. They experience this even when there are no signs of trouble.

In terms of Health Anxiety the belief is that there is a serious health issue and that they may even die.

As we all know at the end of 2019 we saw the emergence of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). This threatened the physical health and lives of people globally to the extent it was classed a pandemic.

The high rate of global infections and deaths has caused people to be worried, fearful and so much more as we grapple in an attempt to get to grips with this spreading virus. For many, the virus has increased the normal anxiety we experience to a serious rate which can be having an increased impact on our psychological health.

We hear daily about the way this is affecting individuals with feelings of depression, sleep disorders and of course Health Anxiety. Let's not forget that it is okay to feel fearful and anxious in the midst of

the pandemic, but how do we manage when this reaches the point where the person feels totally overwhelmed by it to the point where many have even spoken about feelings of suicide.

We also know that anxiety symptoms and their severity has been related to the absence of interpersonal relationship and loneliness, attributed to the physical and social distancing guidelines imposed during periods of lockdown.

We in the UK are in our third national lockdown and this time, it would appear many more people are speaking about their fears and anxiety around both their mental and physical health.

## So, how can we deal with Health Anxiety during the COVID-19 outbreak?

There are things we can do and some of these tips are quite straightforward to follow

### Avoid sensationalized media outlets

- Make sure your information comes from a reliable source
- Don't join in speculative conversations on Facebook or other social media platforms
- Try to leave what you hear where you hear it and don't research further

### Wash your hands

- We have been hearing this simple message since March. Research shows it really does help with the control of the infection
- Use hand sanitiser too when getting back to the car having been grocery shopping

### Stay as active as you can within the restrictions

- With health anxiety, it's important to keep your mind and body occupied
- There are plenty of fitness channels on YouTube to get your at-home workout on
- Go for a walk around the block. You'll be amazed at how a bit of fresh air can free up your mind
- Grab a brain training app, do some puzzles, or read a book to keep yourself occupied

### Own your worry but don't succumb to it

- For somebody with an anxiety or mental health disorder, it's essential to validate your feelings.
- A pandemic is serious business, and your worries about it are completely valid, whether you've been in contact with a person who has the virus, or haven't left your room/home in a few weeks.
- In place of being annoyed at yourself that you can't stop worrying, accept that you're worried and don't blame yourself. But it's important not to get bogged down by the worry, either.
- If you must, allow yourself "worry time"

### Try not to seek unnecessary medical advice

- Those with health anxiety are used to two things: seeing medical professionals excessively, or not at all.
- It is common for individuals with health anxiety to book appointments with physicians if you're worrying about your symptoms. That said, because of the severity of the new coronavirus on those most susceptible to it, only serious cases are being seen in most countries.
- Instead of resorting to contacting your GP just try to keep a relaxed eye on your symptoms.

### Self-isolate — but don't cut yourself off from the world

- If you have to "shield" do make sure family, friends and work colleagues are aware. It may be a good time to step up your contact with them, even if just virtually
- While this opens up other problems like handling loneliness, there's a lot we can do to support friends, family, and neighbours without having to see them face to face.
- Self-isolating doesn't just limit your chances of catching the virus, doing so also protects older adults and immunocompromised people from catching it.

Remember you are not alone in this, although it is acknowledged that at times it may feel as if you are.

Health Anxiety is very real for many and living with it during the pandemic may be distressing. Care first is there to support you 24/7. Care first is a leading provider of confidential, professional counselling, information and advice services. All employees are eligible to use Care first, our services include; telephone counselling, information services and online support. Call Care first on the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.

### Useful sources & Information:

Some of the information sourced for this article was originally published on the links below. If you would like to access this and further information in more detail please follow the links below –

<https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/>

<https://www.healthline.com/health>

If you would like to view the Webinar on '**Health Anxiety**' this is being delivered live on **Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> January at 12:00pm**, please use the following link to register for this session –

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/5288040013283559692>

If you are unable to join the webinar live, a recording of the session can be accessed using the same link above after the webinar has taken place.