

Stopping Your Worst Nightmare

Health anxiety during COVID19

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Excessive persistent worries paired with unhelpful behaviours can lead to health anxiety & despair.

For those previously recovered from Health Anxiety, those battling it now, or those currently developing symptoms – these CBT tips will help.

Normalize. This is, yes, a global pandemic.

During this global COVID19 pandemic, it is indeed prudent that each of us experience some degree of health anxiety. Regular levels of health anxiety will lead to positive, prosocial and healthy behaviours like social distancing and self-isolation. These recommendations have been made by the best health practitioners worldwide.

Some people, however, will experience more than expected anxiety during this time, which may lead to both greater stress and emotional struggle but also greater despair. This real emotional suffering also impacts our overall health. It is important than especially during this COVID19 pandemic to prioritize treating your mental health.

Know your symptoms and how to challenge them.

Health Anxiety has been known to be well treated by Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. These suggestions of symptoms and ways to challenge them are rooted in the CBT model. Note which of these symptoms you can relate to, and ways to challenge the symptom and decrease distress.

Symptom: I have frequent, persistent and/or intense worries about COVID19 impacting me or my loved ones health.

Challenge: Say your exact worry aloud to yourself and someone you trust. Often worries form in an “If...then...” statement. Try to figure out the “then”, like “If I get COVID19.. then I will die”. Saying it out loud and knowing the exact fear/worry is important to knowing what thought you are having and if it needs balancing through evidence gathering (check to see if it’s really true or not). Another way to begin challenging the



intensity, frequency and duration of your symptoms is to begin tracking/monitoring them. There are great free apps you can use to do this like CBT Thought Diary, Mood Path, and Habitly. Good things to track are how often you are having the worries (track each time), name the worry (to see if it's the same or different), feelings associated with the worry and how strong those feelings are.

Symptom: I worry about mine or loved one's body sensations being linked to COVID19. I am frequently checking my own or others body's for signs or symptoms of COVID19.

Practice self-compassion & know you are NOT alone.

Challenge: Link your actions with the worry thought and practice self-compassion. A recognition and self-compassionate thought might be "I want to check my temperature to see if I have COVID19. This is a stressful time for people all over the world and its okay to be scared. I also don't want my mental health to get worse, so I will try hard to reduce the number of times I am symptom checking."

Another way to challenge this behaviour of symptom checking is to again track the number of times you are doing it and begin decreasing the amount of checking. Maybe check your temperature once a day instead of 10 times. Or stop yourself from zooming in on body sensations or escalating others minor physical complaints and instead take a deep calming breath.

Symptom: I frequently check the internet or research symptoms and updates of COVID19.

Challenge: Although it is important to know updates locally related to the pandemic, it isn't helpful to look multiple times a day for information on symptoms, impacts or critical illness and deaths related to the pandemic. Begin tracking this behaviour of checking the internet and limiting how much you are. This may at first cause more anxiety but face the anxiety and stick to your goals. The anxiety will decrease on its own without you having to check more information.

I hope these CBT strategies help you decrease your very real emotional suffering related to this global COVID19 pandemic. Know you are not alone, all of humanity is facing this challenge and degrees of anxiety related to it. Be well, prioritize your mental health during this time, and reach out for virtual psychotherapy services if you need them.

