



SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY

Health Anxiety

Caring for genuine fear without becoming trapped in checking

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCE

Health Anxiety

Health anxiety is persistent fear about illness that remains difficult to settle, even after reassurance or normal results. The physical sensations are real; anxiety itself can affect heart rate, breathing, digestion, pain and attention. The challenge is not caring too much about health. It is becoming caught in a cycle where checking and reassurance provide only brief relief.

You can care responsibly for your health without spending every moment preparing for the worst.

The health-anxiety cycle

A sensation or piece of information triggers a frightening interpretation. Anxiety increases body arousal and focused attention, creating more sensations to monitor. Searching, checking or seeking reassurance reduces fear temporarily, but the relief teaches the brain that the alarm required action. The next sensation is then noticed more quickly and feels more urgent.

Taking symptoms seriously without assuming the worst

A balanced approach does not dismiss everything as anxiety. Follow clear medical guidance for new, severe or persistent symptoms, and know when urgent assessment is appropriate. At the same time, notice when repeated appointments or tests are being used to achieve impossible certainty rather than respond to a meaningful change. Agreeing a plan with one trusted clinician can reduce conflicting advice.

Body scanning and amplified sensation

Attention changes experience. Repeatedly checking a pulse, swallowing, breathing or area of pain can make ordinary variation feel significant. Set periods when you will not deliberately scan or test. Engage the senses outwardly through a task, conversation, music or the environment. The aim is not to ignore the body but to stop treating every sensation as an emergency message.

Searching online

Online information removes context and often presents rare and serious causes alongside common ones. Decide in advance which reliable source you will use, what specific question you need answered and how long you will search. Avoid forums and symptom lists when highly activated. If searching creates more questions than practical action, it is no longer providing useful information.

Reassurance that never lasts

Asking others to check a symptom or promise that nothing is wrong may settle fear briefly. When the doubt returns, more reassurance is needed. Explain the cycle to trusted people and agree on a supportive response: validation of the fear, reference to the medical plan and help returning to the present, without repeatedly answering the same certainty question.

Living alongside uncertainty

No person can have complete certainty about future health. Acceptance does not mean believing illness will happen or refusing medical care. It means making reasonable health decisions and allowing some unanswered possibility to remain. Use a balanced statement: 'I have followed the agreed guidance, and I am choosing to continue my day unless the situation changes in the ways my clinician described.'

Stress, grief and previous medical experiences

Health anxiety may intensify after bereavement, illness, misdiagnosis, trauma or caring for someone. The fear has a history and deserves compassion. Support may need to address loss, trust and safety as well as current checking. Acknowledging why the alarm became sensitive can reduce self-criticism without allowing anxiety to control every decision.

Getting the right support

A GP can assess symptoms and help create a consistent plan. Therapy can address catastrophic interpretation, checking and intolerance of uncertainty. Seek urgent medical care for symptoms that meet emergency guidance, and urgent mental health support if fear leads to inability to cope or stay safe. You deserve care that takes both physical and emotional wellbeing seriously.

A gentle reflection

What feels most important for me to remember? What is one small and realistic form of support I could offer myself today?

This resource offers general information and does not replace personalised medical or mental health care. If you are in immediate danger or unable to keep yourself safe, contact emergency services or an urgent crisis service where you live.