

Health Worries

When your health, symptoms or waiting for answers take over your thoughts

Health uncertainty can be intensely stressful.

A new symptom, a medical appointment, waiting for tests or living with an ongoing condition can make it difficult to think about anything else. Worry is not always irrational: sometimes there genuinely is uncertainty. The challenge is finding ways to live alongside that uncertainty without allowing it to occupy every moment.

Why health worries can become consuming

Our brains are designed to pay attention to possible threats, and changes in the body naturally attract attention. When we do not yet know what a symptom means, the mind often tries to fill the gap. It may search for explanations, imagine possible outcomes, repeatedly check the body or seek reassurance. Each action may bring short-term relief, but uncertainty can quickly return.

Waiting can be particularly difficult because there may be very little practical action available. You may have attended the appointment, completed the test or asked the question, yet still have days or weeks before you know more. That lack of control can leave the nervous system feeling as though it must remain alert.

What health-related stress can look like

Body checking	Repeatedly checking a symptom, pulse, skin, pain, breathing or another bodily sensation.
Searching online	Spending long periods researching symptoms and finding increasingly frightening possibilities.
Reassurance seeking	Frequently asking other people or professionals whether everything is okay, only for the worry to return.
Avoidance	Putting off appointments or tests because receiving information feels frightening.
Appointment anxiety	Feeling distressed before medical appointments, examinations, procedures or conversations.
Waiting for results	Finding it difficult to concentrate on ordinary life while waiting for a call, letter, scan or test result.
Living with illness	Managing symptoms, treatment, uncertainty, changes in independence or fear about the future.

The symptom-anxiety cycle

Stress itself can create physical sensations: muscle tension, dizziness, stomach changes, headaches, a racing heart, sweating, breathlessness or changes in sleep. When someone is already worried about their health, these sensations can understandably become further evidence that something is wrong. Anxiety rises, the body becomes more activated and the sensations become stronger.

This does not mean that physical symptoms should automatically be dismissed as anxiety. New, persistent, worsening or concerning symptoms deserve appropriate medical assessment. The aim is to avoid assuming either extreme: that every sensation signals serious illness, or that every symptom is 'just stress'.

Coping while waiting for answers

Try to separate what is known from what is feared. Write down the facts you currently have, the questions that still need answering and the next planned medical step. When your mind starts trying to solve what cannot yet be known, gently return to the information you actually have today.

Consider limiting symptom searching to reliable health sources and avoiding repeated searches when you notice they are increasing rather than reducing distress. If you need to prepare for an appointment, write questions down once so your brain does not have to keep rehearsing them.

Preparing for an appointment

Take a short list of your main symptoms, when they started, what changes them, medications or treatments you use and the questions that matter most. If appointments are difficult to process, ask whether you can bring someone with you, take notes or receive important information in writing. It is reasonable to ask a clinician to explain something again or in different language.

A health-worry check-in

What do I know for certain today?	
What am I afraid might happen?	
What medical advice or assessment have I already received?	
Is there a next practical step, or am I currently waiting?	
Is checking or searching helping me, or increasing the worry?	
What can I give my attention to while I wait?	

Practical ways to reduce the mental load

Create a worry window. Give health worries a planned period rather than allowing them to occupy the entire day.

Write questions down. Once a question is recorded for your appointment, you do not have to keep holding it mentally.

Reduce repeated checking. If medically safe to do so, notice when checking has become reassurance-seeking rather than useful monitoring.

Keep ordinary life present. Meals, routines, hobbies, work, rest and contact with other people matter while you wait.

Regulate the body. Gentle breathing, movement, grounding and rest can reduce the additional physical sensations created by stress.

When to seek support

Speak with an appropriate healthcare professional about new, worsening or concerning physical symptoms. If health worries themselves are consuming large parts of your day, repeatedly driving checking or reassurance-seeking, affecting sleep or preventing you from attending healthcare, psychological support may also be useful. Both physical and emotional concerns deserve to be taken seriously.

Further reading

Overcoming Health Anxiety by David Veale and Rob Willson offers CBT-based approaches to health anxiety. **It's Not All in Your Head** by Gordon J. G. Asmundson and Steven Taylor explores how health

anxiety develops and can be managed. Choose reading that supports you rather than material that encourages further symptom checking.

A message

Waiting for answers can make time feel very different. A few days can feel enormous when your mind keeps returning to the same question: what if? You do not have to force yourself to stop caring about your health. Try instead to keep bringing yourself back to what you know today, what the next step is and what remains outside your control for now. You are allowed to live in the space between the appointment and the answer.

Important: This resource does not diagnose symptoms or replace medical advice. Seek appropriate medical care for new, severe, persistent or worsening symptoms. If you believe you may be experiencing a medical emergency, seek urgent medical assistance.