HEALTH ANXIETY

A Coaching Guide for Family & Loved Ones

Practical ways to offer compassionate support, understand reassurance cycles, maintain healthy boundaries and care for yourself.

Why this guide matters

Health anxiety can leave a person frightened by bodily sensations, uncertainty about illness or the possibility of missing something serious. Loved ones may feel pulled between wanting to offer comfort and feeling exhausted by repeated requests for certainty. Neither person benefits from blame.

This coaching companion to the interactive Support Hub guide offers reflection prompts, examples and a shared support-plan framework. It is not a diagnosis or a replacement for professional or urgent medical advice.

1 | Understand the experience

Health anxiety may involve heightened attention to symptoms, checking, online searching, repeated reassurance or avoidance of appointments. These responses can briefly reduce fear while sometimes keeping the anxiety cycle going. Physical symptoms must not automatically be dismissed as anxiety.

Coaching reflection: What situations tend to bring the fear to the surface? What does the person say they need in those moments? What might they be experiencing beneath the repeated questions?

2 | Notice the reassurance cycle

Trigger → frightening interpretation → checking or reassurance → short-lived relief → renewed doubt.

Instead of offering endless certainty, gently validate the emotion and return to a mutually agreed plan. Reassurance is not “bad”; the aim is to reduce repetitive reassurance that leaves everyone feeling more trapped.

> Try saying: “I can see that this feels frightening. I care about you. We have already talked through this worry, so can we try the next step in our plan rather than searching again?”

3 | Make communication safer

Listen before trying to solve the problem. Ask whether the person wants quiet company, a short conversation, practical assistance or help contacting a clinician. Avoid ridicule, arguments, false promises and abrupt withdrawal of support.

> Useful question: “Would listening, sitting together, or helping you follow the agreed plan be most useful right now?”

Practical Coaching: Boundaries and Support

4 | Boundaries that protect the relationship

A boundary is not punishment. It is a clear explanation of what you can offer and what you cannot keep doing. Discuss boundaries at a calm time, not in the middle of panic. Agree how urgent symptoms will be handled separately from recurring anxiety-driven reassurance.

Examples: “I can listen for ten minutes, but I cannot search symptoms online with you.” “I can accompany you to an appointment, but I cannot decide what a symptom means.” “If a medical professional has given us a plan, let’s follow it.”

Boundary coaching exercise

What do I want to continue offering?

What is becoming unsustainable for me?

How can I explain the boundary with care and consistency?

5 | When anxiety rises

Pause and acknowledge: “This looks really distressing.” Check practical safety: follow established medical advice; seek assessment for new, severe or concerning symptoms. Offer choices: quiet company, grounding, a change of setting or a planned coping technique. Reconnect afterwards: discuss what helped when both people feel calmer.

Avoid treating a genuine medical concern as automatically psychological. In the UK, call 999 for a medical emergency or NHS 111 for urgent advice when it is not an emergency.

6 | Supporting recovery without becoming the therapist

Therapeutic support, often including cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), can help people recognise unhelpful checking or avoidance and build greater tolerance of uncertainty. A family member can encourage engagement with care, celebrate manageable steps and support chosen goals, but should not assume the role of clinician.

Discussion prompt: What would meaningful progress look like for the person experiencing anxiety—not simply for the people around them?

Your Shared Support Plan

Complete together where possible. Each person’s needs and consent matter.

Our common triggers and early signs

What helps when fear begins to build

How we will respond to repeated reassurance requests

Our boundaries and what support is available

When and how we will seek medical advice

What the supporter needs to stay well

Reflection and Next Steps

7 | Looking after the supporter

You may experience worry, frustration, fatigue or guilt. These feelings do not cancel out the care you have for the person. Maintaining your own sleep, relationships, work, downtime and support network is part of keeping your involvement sustainable.

Consider a boundary around availability, a trusted person you can talk to and an activity unrelated to illness concerns. If the situation is affecting your mental wellbeing, professional support may be helpful for you too.

A gentle family coaching conversation

Set aside a calm, agreed time. Take turns answering the following without interrupting or correcting one another:

- What does support feel like to me?
- Which responses seem helpful in the moment but unhelpful over time?
- What boundaries would allow us both to feel respected?
- How will we respond to genuine new symptoms or medical advice?
- What small change could we test this week?

My one manageable next step

What I want to review after trying it

When to seek additional help

If anxiety is persistent, worsening or restricting daily life, encourage a conversation with a GP or appropriately qualified mental health professional. If someone may be at immediate risk of harm or has a medical emergency, call 999. For urgent but non-emergency help in England, NHS 111 can advise. Samaritans is available on 116 123 for emotional support.

Space to Breathe Therapy

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