

# Health Anxiety course resource

Information for whānau  
and friends

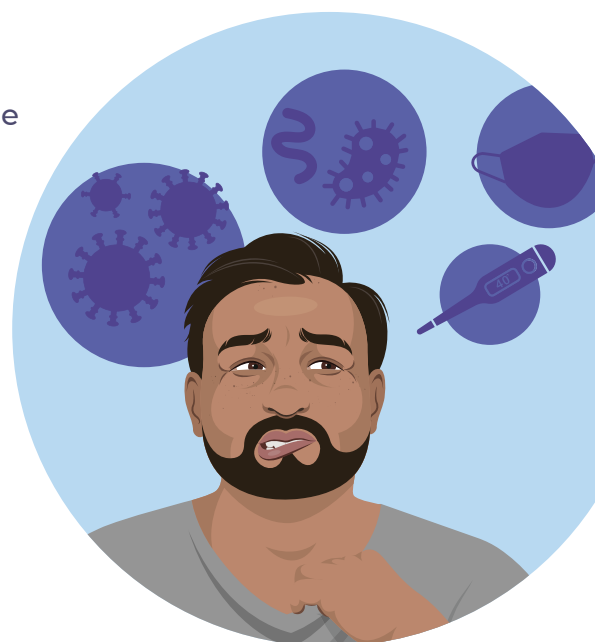


## Introduction

Haere mai, welcome. It's great that you're taking this time to learn how to support your loved one struggling with health anxiety!

This resource has been developed as a guide to help you understand health anxiety and how to support your loved one during their treatment. It might be helpful to go through this guide with your loved one, so they can help you understand what information relates to them and what may not be relevant.

We hope this guide gives you the information you need and supports you and your loved one on their journey to wellbeing.



## The experience of supporting someone with health anxiety

Supporting someone experiencing health anxiety can be challenging. One of the ways people with health anxiety try to cope with their worries is to ask others to give them reassurance they'll be okay. They can make lots of medical appointments, or ask people to do things for them they feel is too dangerous for their health. They might ask their family to avoid eating or cooking certain foods, to wash or clean things over and over again or in a certain way, or make their family (including children) avoid doing things that they worry may harm them, but you think are okay. Sometimes they might take their worries and frustrations out on you and their loved ones. You may have noticed major changes in their behaviour or moods. They might feel 'down' or worried all the time and not want to go out or do the things they used to love. You may be getting into more arguments, and you might feel more frustrated and disconnected from them because of the toll their worries are taking on your relationship. It may feel impossible sometimes to know the right thing to say or do, and you may begin feeling more worried, sad or angry because of the challenges you're facing. We want you to know that all of these challenges are common, and things can get better – read on and we'll show you how.

## Understanding health anxiety

It can really help to understand what health anxiety is. This resource will help, but it may be also be a good idea to go through the Health Anxiety course, either alone or with your loved one.

## So, what is health anxiety?

Health anxiety is a term used to describe a type of anxiety people can experience where they get stuck with unrealistic worries about their health or the health of loved ones. These worries can have a big impact on their enjoyment of life and relationships. People who have a current major or minor health issue can experience health anxiety, as well as people who have recovered from an illness in the past. People who have never been seriously unwell can also experience health anxiety.

When people experience health anxiety, they tend to focus a lot on their bodies, including any changes or sensations. These bodily symptoms are real, but when they're seen by the individual as a sign of a serious illness – it causes a lot of anxiety.

### People with health anxiety may worry about

- different feelings and physical sensations and what they might mean (e.g., I have a problem with my heart).
- getting certain diseases, such as HIV or cancer.
- being exposed to disease or germs.
- being reminded about illness, disease, or death.
- becoming unwell from reading or hearing about diseases.



Health anxiety can sometimes be called Illness Anxiety Disorder, and Somatic Symptom Disorder and in the past has been called Hypochondriasis. Whichever label or 'diagnosis' that is used isn't important. What matters is understanding how we can get stuck in our health worries, and how we can work our way out of them.

### The three major factors that drive health anxiety

Thoughts, such as:

- Jumping to conclusions about what body sensations mean.
- Believing they are going to develop a serious illnesses or disease (or that they are already sick).
- Worrying someone in their family might develop a serious illness or get sick.
- Believing if they did get sick, they wouldn't be able to cope.
- Believing a worst case outcome would happen (e.g., they might die and their family would never cope without them).

### Physical sensations, such as:

- Body sensations caused by anxiety (heart racing or heart palpitations, dizziness, shortness of breath, trembling, feeling 'spacy' as if they are disconnected from their body or surroundings).



### Behaviours, such as:

- Frequently checking their body (or the body of loved ones) for signs and symptoms of disease.
- Mentally scanning their body, 'feeling' for symptoms.
- Repeatedly asking others for reassurance.
- Spending a lot of time searching the Internet about diseases and diagnoses.
- Avoiding situations, activities, people, and places that remind them of illness.

## What causes health anxiety?

Health anxiety is caused by a range of factors that work together to increase a person's chances of getting stuck worrying about their health. Health anxiety might start after a person hears about, or learns about someone suffering and dying from a serious illness, when they have had a serious health scare, or if they start a new job that increases their contact with sick people. Some people with health anxiety may have a serious diagnosed disease or illness (like a heart condition), and spend their time worrying and looking out for symptoms it is getting worse. Some people may have had a serious illness in the past (e.g., cancer), and may develop health anxiety through worrying the illness might come back.

Health anxiety may also show up due to environmental and genetic risk factors – so if a person in their family (e.g., a caregiver) has been anxious and worried about their health, they're more likely to experience it too.

## What health anxiety is not

Health anxiety isn't about people seeking attention, or being dramatic. It doesn't mean people are selfish, though people can become quite self-focused while they're struggling. It doesn't mean they are 'crazy' or out of touch with reality, or that they

will never be the same again. Like low mood and depression, or other types of anxiety, it can get better with time as people learn more about health anxiety and how to overcome it.

## Is anxiety the same as depression?

Depression and health anxiety are very different conditions, but they can occur together.

If someone with health anxiety is struggling with depression or low mood, it might help to get support to improve their mood first, as this can make it much easier to begin tackling health anxiety. It's also important to seek help for depression if the person is having any thoughts of suicide or is experiencing severe challenges related to their low moods. Going along with your loved one to see a health professional may be a great support; however, if they refuse and you're really worried, you can contact their health professional and pass on your concerns. The Mental Health Foundation has helpful information on how to best support others and what to do if you're concerned for someone's safety. You can access their website by clicking here or going to <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/help/supporting-others>.

## Do people with health anxiety have control over their behaviour?

Yes; however, if they're feeling overwhelmed by stress and anxiety, it may feel as though they're not in control over how they feel, what they do, what they think and what they say. A big part of overcoming health anxiety is regaining control and realising they can make choices about how they will act and what they do.

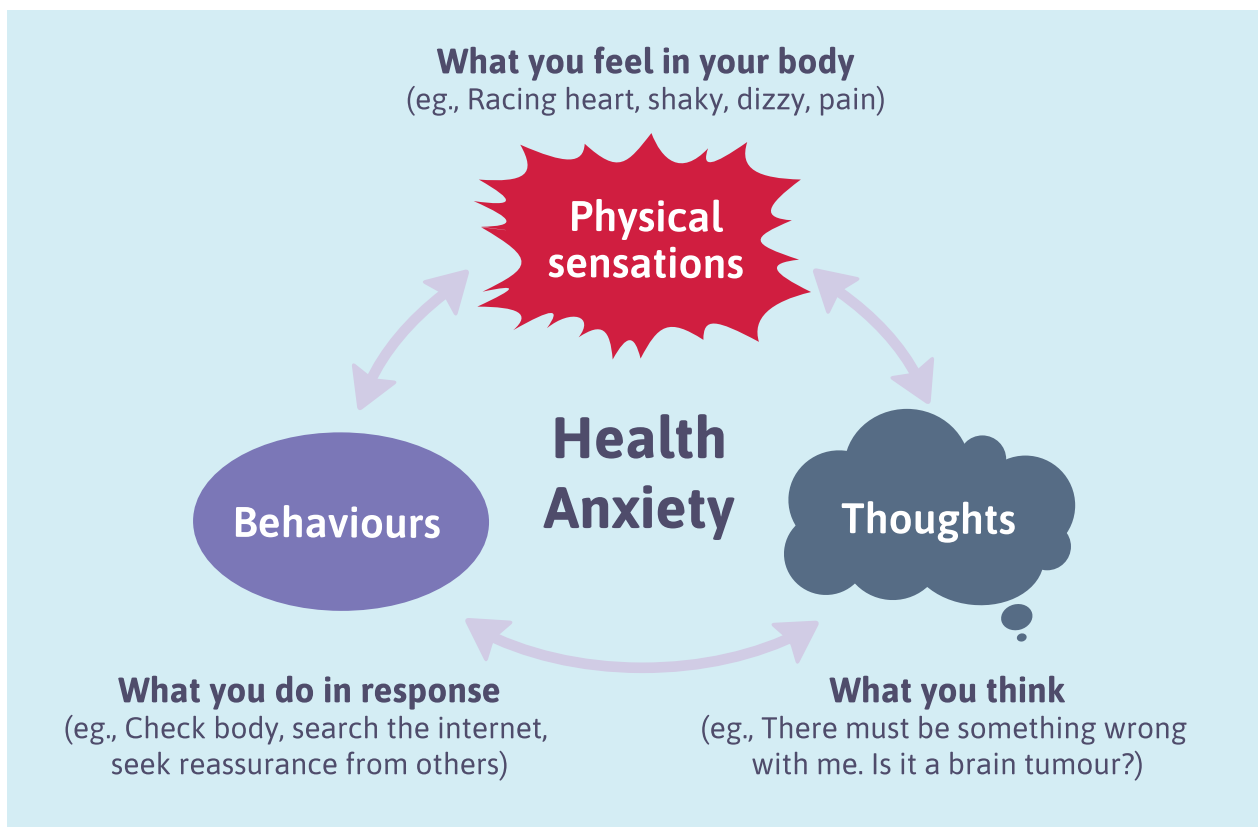
It's very important to understand that the person with health anxiety did not choose this, just like people don't choose to have asthma or heart disease. Often people want to change their behaviours and reduce the impact that health anxiety has on their life and others, but this is a very difficult process that requires lots of effort and can sometimes feel overwhelming.

## Treatment for health anxiety

The Just a Thought Health Anxiety course is based on a treatment called cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) that is proven to be a very effective treatment.

CBT helps people understand how their thoughts (cognitions) and behaviours (what they do and how they act) affect how they feel. This is understood by looking at what we call the cycle of health anxiety (see below).

# The cycle of health anxiety



Treatment aims to break down the cycle, teaching people specific skills to address each factor to break the cycle. Some skills focus on reducing the physical symptoms (like tension, restlessness, and heart palpitations), while others work to reduce unhelpful behaviours and thinking patterns that keep health anxiety going.

CBT teaches people how to identify and change unhelpful patterns of thinking and behaviour they might be stuck in. A key part is learning to gradually reduce checking, Internet searching, and reassurance-seeking, so people can begin to see they might be overestimating the likelihood that they are ill, and underestimating their ability to cope with difficult situations.

## Helping a loved one with health anxiety

There are lots of things you can do to help your loved one as they work through their Health Anxiety course.

### Ask the person how you can help

Find out if, and how they'd like you to be involved. The person may find it helpful to talk to you about their concerns or they may not. They may also like you to help encourage them with the skills and changes they put in place.



## Do positive activities with them

Helping them take the focus off their worries can be really helpful. Spend time together doing relaxing, fun, and fulfilling activities.

## Offer support and encouragement

CBT is effective, but it's hard too. It requires lots of effort, determination, courage, and patience. People have to face their biggest fears, which can be difficult. Health anxiety can make people feel alone, silly, ashamed, and helpless. Offering encouragement and praise, support, comfort, and affection is so helpful, and will help keep them motivated to keep going.

The course can take around six weeks or longer to get through. It's helpful to keep encouraging your loved ones to keep practising their new skills.



## Avoid giving too much advice or criticising the person

They are just beginning to learn how to manage their symptoms, and it will take a long time and lots of hard work to feel more confident with their new skills. Remember, you're not responsible or to blame for their challenges, so don't put pressure on yourself.

## Avoid taking part in health anxiety behaviours

It is normal and understandable to want to help your loved one feel less distressed, and reassurance can often help people in distress feel better, quickly. The challenge is, it quickly becomes a habit, and you find yourself having to reassure them every time they are worried or upset. This can end up making it harder for the person to both start building the confidence to reassure themselves, learn to tolerate anxiety and uncertainty better, and step forward into the challenging work that helps them overcome their health worries.

## Here are some behaviours that often don't help in the long run:

- Giving reassurance like “you're okay”, or “there's nothing wrong” (whether you've been asked to give it, or whether you offer it).
- Encouraging people to check their body for reassurance (e.g., checking an area of worry so they feel better).
- Encouraging them to have unnecessary tests, treatments, and investigations (which their health team don't see as necessary).
- Helping them avoid foods or places that trigger health worry.
- Protecting them from hearing about health-related information.
- Helping them check their body for symptoms, or Internet searching on their behalf.

## Make a plan together about how you will change your behaviours

Having a plan together and understanding why these behaviours won't help in the long run can make a difference. Planning to cut down gradually as the person slowly builds confidence in their own abilities will not only provide great support but will build into what they will be doing in this course.



### It's important for you to:

- know it is normal for their anxiety to increase (before it gets better) when you start to reduce your reassuring.
- be aware that it will be harder for the person to make changes in their behaviours at times of great stress.
- know your own triggers to providing reassurance and try to plan what you'll do instead.
- avoid putting too much pressure on the person to change, and try to stay calm and supportive if things get challenging.
- have a plan, and even a response ready if they do ask for reassurance. For instance, you could say, "I know that if I reassure you, you'll feel better for a while, but it won't help you build your confidence. What else could we do to help how you're feeling right now?"
- try and be aware if you start to fall back into old patterns of reassuring.
- challenge your own thoughts about providing reassurance or checking. For example, if you think: "They won't cope with the anxiety if I don't provide reassurance" then try and think of other times they have coped, or other big challenges where they've shown strength.

Be clear on what you don't feel comfortable doing, and get support for yourself if you need it.

Your wellbeing matters too. It's important to know what you feel comfortable doing to help, and what you need to do to look after your own wellbeing. You may be feeling lots of uncomfortable emotions, including worry, frustration, and maybe resentment. These are normal feelings given what you're going through as a support person for your loved one.

Getting some support for yourself might make all the difference. Consider speaking to your healthcare professional about your options here. You may find the following



websites and helplines helpful.

- (1737) You can free call or text 1737 any time, 24 hours a day to speak with a trained counsellor
- [Yellow Brick Road](#) – Yellow Brick Road is a national organisation providing support, knowledge, advocacy, and empowerment for families who have a loved one experiencing mental health challenges.
- [Mental Health Foundation](#) – the Mental Health Foundation has a great resource page for whānau and friends who are supporting a loved one struggling with their mental wellbeing.

We hope you have found some useful ideas in this resource and wish you and your loved one well.

Nga mihi,

The team from Just a Thought

[www.justathought.co.nz](http://www.justathought.co.nz)