



## Health Anxiety and Nosemaphobia (Hypochondriasis – Fear of Illness)

Illness phobias are very different from most phobias in that they consist of fears of a situation from which the sufferer cannot escape.

Health anxiety and illness phobia can be described as a sufferer having repeated worries and concerns about a specific illness/disease, such as cancer, AIDS, HIV, or heart disease. The sufferer might fear that he/she actually has the disease or worries about developing it.

Many people at some point in their lives have looked in medical dictionaries or have undertaken additional reading on an illness they thought they might have, only to scare themselves silly! However, those with illness phobia are unable to move on with their lives and forget negative thoughts about specific illness/disease despite being aware of their irrationality.

### What causes illness phobia?

Phobias about illness can be triggered by many events: negative experiences in childhood, losing a close relative or friend to an illness, associating death and disease or general anxiety resulting in concern about one's health. The latter is the most usual cause of the development of illness phobia. In fact, there is a very fine line between illness phobias and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Some classify it as OCD because of the characteristic presence of unwanted ruminations. The fact that sufferers of this phobia can quickly go from fearing illness to being obsessed about illness, convincing themselves that every ache and pain is a sign of their specific feared illness, is indicative of the obsessive nature of nosemapobia.

The causes of illness phobia are often varied. Sometimes the sufferer may have identified with a relative or friend who had a specific illness. Frequently, illness phobia is triggered following publicity campaigns around specific illnesses.

For example, AIDS and cancer are often in the news and may trigger people's inner insecurities.

Where illness phobia has its roots in OCD, it is common to find sufferers changing the illness they are worried about during the course of time. For example, many young illness phobics worry about AIDS at first but later, when in their early thirties, begin to worry about cancer and heart disease. Therefore, it is important that treatment does not focus entirely on alleviating the sufferer's concerns about a specific disease, as the tendency will be to swap diseases.

Anxiety, of course, produces very real physical symptoms. If these symptoms did not occur when we experienced stress, we would be abnormal. Unfortunately, many illness phobics misinterpret these normal physical reactions, believing them to be signs of their feared illness. Repeated checking and reassurance seeking maintains the person's anxiety because it interferes with normalising these physical sensations and maintains an excessive focus of attention on the areas of concern.

### AIDS/HIV phobia

This particular phobia has naturally become more common as a direct result of increased publicity. The fact that the HIV virus remains dormant for many years and so those carrying the virus appear outwardly 'healthy' adds to the fears of illness phobics. The virus can take up to three months to become detectable following infection, therefore tests need to be repeated and do little to reassure illness phobics that they are healthy. Indeed, many AIDS phobics find that even when they have had a test which comes back negative, they then start to worry about the test needle infecting them.

### Cancer phobia

Those with this phobia may worry that they have cancer themselves and become obsessed with every bodily symptom they experience, believing it to be a sign of

cancer. Others will not touch anything belonging to those who have cancer. They may also be afraid of getting too close to someone who has cancer in case they 'catch it', although this is of course impossible. If such sufferers do believe they have come into contact with a cancer sufferer, they may be unable to eat that day and/or will wash repeatedly in an OCD-like manner.

One of the most common symptoms of anxiety are headaches, which can cause considerable distress to sufferers of illness phobia who may misinterpret them as being signs of a brain tumour.

### Heart phobia

Many people misinterpret their increased heart rate during panic episodes as being a sign of heart disease or an impending heart attack. In general, these types of fears seem to disturb men more so than women. This may be because we hear more about heart attacks affecting men.

### What can be done about illness phobia?

The problem feared is about the body, which obviously cannot be avoided. Illness phobia is treatable but recovery can take time. If anxiety is a prominent symptom of the phobia, a GP can prescribe an antidepressant to alleviate the symptoms. It might also help to have a thorough check-up in order to allay any immediate fears about health.

There are many ways of tackling anxiety and phobias. To find out the latest recommendations from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), visit [www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk) or ring **0845 003 7780**.

Over the years, our members have recommended ways to manage anxiety, including the following:

### Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

CBT currently has the largest amount of research carried out on its effectiveness.



CBT focuses on what people think, how those thoughts affect them emotionally and how they ultimately behave. When someone is distressed or anxious, the way they see and evaluate themselves can become negative. CBT therapists work alongside the person to help them begin to see the link between negative thoughts and mood. This empowers people to assert control over negative emotions and to change the way they behave. CBT has grown in popularity following recommendations from the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) for the treatment of anxiety disorders.

CBT can be delivered at a number of levels of intensity, meaning it can be useful to those who have only just started feeling anxious as well as those with longstanding anxiety problems. CBT is delivered by a trained therapist, usually in a clinical setting. This form of therapy focuses on the 'here and now' and is not overly concerned with finding the initial cause of anxiety. Once the problem has been explored, the therapist will help you examine your thought and behaviour patterns and help you to work on ways of changing these.

Anxiety UK offers a CBT service to its members face-to-face, over the phone or via webcam. In the unlikely event that Anxiety UK is unable to help you, we would recommend accessing therapy through referral to an NHS service via your GP. You can also find a CBT therapist via the British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP) at [www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com).

### Counselling

Counselling is often used to explore issues in-depth and to allow for a focus on feelings associated with anxiety. Often, the cause of your anxiety can also be explored through counselling sessions. The most common form of counselling is known as Person Centred Counselling. This type of therapy seeks to explore the main issues from your unique perspective. Counselling is available through Anxiety UK face-to-face, via the telephone or via

webcam. In the unlikely event that Anxiety UK is unable to help you, we would recommend accessing therapy through referral to an NHS service via your GP. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy can also advise on how to find a counsellor in your area at [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk).

### Clinical Hypnotherapy

Although clinical hypnotherapy is not a NICE approved therapy, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence available to suggest that this type of therapy is very beneficial to people experiencing anxiety. Indeed, over the years that x, we have consistently had positive feedback from members about hypnotherapy.

Hypnotherapy aims to provide people with results fairly quickly. Hypnotherapists will use a variety of techniques such as visualisation, which is aimed at producing quite deep levels of relaxation. Visualisation involves asking you to imagine a feared situation or object while you are in a deep state of relaxation. You are then asked to use positive visualisation to manage how you are feeling and to imagine the experience in a positive way.

Anxiety UK offers clinical hypnotherapy to members. To find out if we have a clinical hypnotherapist in your area, ring our helpline on **08444 775 774**. You can also find a clinical hypnotherapist in your area by visiting the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) at [www.cnhc.org.uk](http://www.cnhc.org.uk).

### Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

NLP is based on the idea that we create our experiences from how we see, hear and feel things in our mind and body. It is based on the idea that our mind and body are interlinked, with our thoughts having a direct effect on our bodies and vice versa. NLP can help people change any unwanted behaviours through the use of language patterns which challenge outdated beliefs and tap into the unconscious thoughts that we hold. An NLP therapist helps individuals to use positive language and thought processes to manage their anxiety in a

more positive way.

Anxiety UK offers NLP nationally. Ring our helpline on **08444 775 774** to find out if we have an NLP therapist in your area.

### Relaxation

If you suffer from panic attacks due to your anxiety or fear, it may help to learn some relaxation techniques. These can be used as a way of enduring the thoughts for longer and longer periods, and thus overcoming your anxiety by discovering that nothing bad happens even if you think about your anxiety or fear. Anxiety UK has a number of relaxation resources and products at [www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk). You could also find out more from your GP or a stress management class at your local Adult Education Centre.

### Medication

Anxiety medication may be prescribed if the fear is accompanied by frequent panic attacks and loss of sleep. It is important to note that medication will only help to alleviate symptoms and will not resolve any underlying issues. NICE recommends that if medication is taken, you also undertake other forms of treatment.

### Further reading

Some of the books listed below are available at the Anxiety UK shop at [www.anxietyuk.org.uk/shop](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/shop) or over the telephone on **08444 775 774**. By purchasing through Anxiety UK, you are also helping to support the charity.

### Overcoming Health Anxiety

Dr David Veale, Rob Willson

### Overcoming Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

Dr David Veale, Rob Willson

Anxiety UK would like to thank Rob Willson for his assistance in producing this factsheet.

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