Keeping Well After Managing Health Anxiety: Staying on Track and Preventing Relapse

THE TALKING THERAPIES UK SELF-HELP SERIES



Keeping Well After Managing Health Anxiety: Staying on Track and Preventing Relapse

A Step-2 Guided Self-Help Programme

A self-help workbook · 7 modules · about 7 weeks

TALKING THERAPIES UK

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First edition, 2026.

This workbook accompanies the Keeping Well After Managing Health Anxiety: Staying on Track and Preventing Relapse programme on the Talking Therapies UK self-help platform. Its text is drawn from the programme and is kept current with it: whenever the programme changes, the workbook is set again.

Revision 6. This printing was set on 10 November 2026 from the programme as it stood that day.

A note on using this workbook. It offers self-help based on established psychological approaches for difficulties of mild to moderate severity. It is not a substitute for assessment or treatment by a qualified professional and is not designed for use in a crisis. The examples in it are fictional; no real person appears in them. If you are worried about your safety, or your difficulties are getting worse, the page headed “When self-help is not enough” says where to turn.

Set in Poppins and Roboto, the Talking Therapies UK typefaces.

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How to use this workbook

This programme builds on the skills you learned in the initial health anxiety course, helping you to stay on track and avoid relapse. It uses the same evidence base that underpins CBT for health anxiety – including large randomised trials and systematic reviews that show guided self-help can reduce worry and improve quality of life. Each module is designed to be completed in about 30 minutes and can be worked through at your own pace, with practical exercises and reflection prompts. By the end you will have a personalised plan to manage future anxiety and maintain your progress.

This workbook is the written form of the Keeping Well After Managing Health Anxiety: Staying on Track and Preventing Relapse programme on the Talking Therapies UK self-help platform. It follows the programme module by module: each part of the book is one module, and each chapter is one piece of the module's teaching, set in the order the programme presents it.

Read the chapters of a part in order, then turn to the worksheets that follow them. The worksheets are the part of the work that changes things, so give them the time they ask for and come back to them as the weeks go on. You may copy or print the worksheets for your own use, as often as you need.

Most people work through one module a week, which takes the whole programme about 7 weeks. Go at the pace that suits you: a module done properly is worth more than two done quickly.

The check-in questionnaires let you see how things are changing. Complete each one when you reach it, note the date and your total, and compare it with the last.

When self-help is not enough

- If you are in danger now, or have seriously harmed yourself, call 999 or go to your nearest accident and emergency department.
- If you need help urgently but it is not an emergency, call NHS 111 or contact your GP surgery.
- Samaritans are there day and night, every day of the year: call 116 123 free from any phone.
- If you would rather not talk, text SHOUT to 85258 for free, confidential support at any hour.
- If your difficulties are getting worse as you work through this book, or you find yourself thinking about ending your life, stop and speak to your GP or a mental health professional. A workbook can be a good start, and some difficulties need more help than a book can give.

What this workbook will help you to do

- You will gain a clear definition of health anxiety and recognise how it can influence your thoughts, feelings and behaviours. You will also learn how to identify the common patterns that keep the anxiety cycle going.
- You will learn to map out the situations, thoughts and bodily sensations that trigger your anxiety. You will practice noticing early warning signs so you can intervene before worry spirals.
- You will practise identifying distorted thoughts and replacing them with balanced,

evidence-based alternatives. You will also learn how to use thought records to track progress and build confidence.

- You will design and carry out simple experiments to test the accuracy of your health-related fears. You will learn how to interpret the results and adjust your beliefs accordingly.
- You will acquire a toolbox of relaxation, grounding and self-monitoring techniques to use when anxiety spikes. You will also learn how to create a personal symptom-management plan.
- You will develop a structured plan that outlines what to do when anxiety resurfaces, including early intervention steps and support contacts. You will also set realistic, measurable goals for maintaining progress.
- You will learn how to embed the skills into your daily routine and identify ongoing support resources. You will also create a personalised self-care schedule to sustain your wellbeing.

PART 1

Understanding Health Anxiety

What It Is and How It Affects You

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to Your Relapse Prevention Programme

Welcome to the first module of Keeping Well After Managing Health Anxiety: Staying on Track and Preventing Relapse. This programme is designed to help you consolidate the skills you learned during your initial health anxiety course, ensuring you can maintain your progress and handle future challenges with confidence. Based on robust, evidence-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) principles—supported by extensive clinical trials and systematic reviews—this guided self-help format empowers you to take control of your well-being at your own pace.

In this opening module, titled Understanding Health Anxiety: What It Is and How It Affects You, we will revisit the core concepts of health anxiety and explore how it manifests in your daily life. While you may have already completed earlier work, taking time to review these foundations is a vital step in relapse prevention. It allows you to step back, assess where you are right now, and strengthen your psychological toolkit before small worries have a chance to grow.

A NOTE

Remember, recovery is not a straight line. Experiencing occasional health worries is completely normal; relapse prevention is about catching those moments early and responding differently.

By the end of this module, you will have a clear understanding of the maintenance cycle that keeps health anxiety going, and you will be able to identify your personal triggers and early warning signs. Let’s begin by looking at how your thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviours interact to create and sustain health anxiety.

CHAPTER 2

Orientation to the Programme and Defining Health Anxiety

Welcome to 'Keeping Well After Managing Health Anxiety: Staying on Track and Preventing Relapse'. This programme builds directly upon the foundational skills you learned in your initial health anxiety course. Whether you completed that course recently or some time ago, the aim of this follow-on guide is to help you consolidate your progress, protect your hard-earned gains, and build lasting resilience against future setbacks. Extensive clinical research, including large randomised trials and systematic reviews, demonstrates that evidence-based guided self-help remains one of the most effective ways to reduce distressing worry, break unhelpful avoidance patterns, and significantly improve your day-to-day quality of life. Each module in this seven-part programme is designed to take about 30 minutes, allowing you to work through the material at your own comfortable pace, supported by practical tools, worked examples, and structured reflection prompts. By the time you reach the final module, you will have created a fully personalised relapse prevention plan tailored precisely to your unique triggers and lifestyle.

To begin this journey effectively, it is vital that we ground our understanding in a clear, shared definition of health anxiety. Health anxiety, sometimes referred to in clinical settings as severe health-related anxiety or hypochondriasis, is not simply about caring for your well-being or wanting to stay healthy. In fact, everyone cares about their health to some degree; it is a normal, adaptive human instinct to seek medical attention when something genuinely feels wrong. However, health anxiety becomes a clinical concern when it involves a persistent, distressing preoccupation with having, or acquiring, a serious, undiagnosed medical condition. This preoccupation is typically accompanied by a high level of bodily hypervigilance, where ordinary, harmless physiological sensations—such as a brief muscle twitch, a minor headache, or a momentary flutter in the chest—are catastrophically misinterpreted as signs of a life-threatening illness like cancer, heart disease, or a neurological disorder.

A NOTE

Remember, noticing bodily sensations is completely normal. The key difference in health anxiety is the catastrophic meaning assigned to those sensations, rather than the sensations themselves.

To understand how this operates in daily life, let us consider a typical everyday scenario. Imagine Sarah, who completed a CBT-based health anxiety course six months ago and had been feeling much better. One afternoon while sitting at her desk, she notices a dull, fleeting ache in her upper left back. For someone without health anxiety, this sensation might be briefly noted as a sign of poor posture from hunching over a computer, leading them to stretch their shoulders or adjust their chair, after which the thought vanishes. For Sarah, however, the moment that back ache registers in her awareness, a familiar spark of alarm ignites. Her mind races back to an online article she read months ago about atypical presentations of cardiac conditions. Within seconds, her internal dialogue shifts from 'That's an awkward stretch' to 'What if my heart is failing? What if the doctors missed something vital during my last check-up?'

Trigger: A minor, dull muscular ache in the upper left back. Automatic Thought: ‘This isn’t a muscle strain; this is a cardiac event happening right now.’ Emotional Consequence: Sudden spike in adrenaline, racing heartbeat, intense panic, and an overwhelming urge to check her pulse.

This example illustrates the core mechanism of health anxiety: the leap from an ambiguous bodily sensation to a catastrophic health conclusion. When we experience this kind of catastrophic appraisal, our autonomic nervous system instantly triggers the fight-or-flight response. Adrenaline and cortisol flood the bloodstream, causing our heart rate to accelerate, our breathing to become shallow and rapid, and our muscles to tense up. Crucially, these stress responses create new physical symptoms—such as dizziness, chest tightness, or tingling fingers—which are then taken as further ‘proof’ that the initial catastrophic fear was completely accurate. This creates a powerful self-fulfilling loop that can leave you feeling trapped, exhausted, and constantly on guard within your own body.

As you embark on this refresher module, it is important to approach your experiences with self-compassion rather than harsh self-judgment. If you notice that old patterns have begun to creep back in, or if you find yourself slipping into familiar habits of worry, do not view this as a failure of your previous therapy. Instead, view it as valuable information. Health anxiety is like a well-worn groove in a path; when stress, fatigue, or major life changes occur, our brains naturally tend to slide back into the most familiar neural pathways. This programme is designed to help you reinforce alternative, healthier pathways so that you can navigate future health concerns with confidence, clarity, and calm.