Managing Health Anxiety: Premium Guided Self-Help Programme

THE TALKING THERAPIES UK SELF-HELP SERIES



Managing Health Anxiety: Premium Guided Self-Help Programme

An in-depth, evidence-based CBT course for adults

A self-help workbook · 12 modules · about 12 weeks

TALKING THERAPIES UK

First edition · 2026

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First edition, 2026.

This workbook accompanies the Managing Health Anxiety: Premium Guided Self-Help Programme 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 8. This printing was set on 8 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.

Contents

How to use this workbook 1

Part 1 Understanding Health Anxiety: Foundations and Personal History 7

1. Welcome to the Managing Health Anxiety Programme 8
2. What is Health Anxiety? Defining the Problem and How It Differs from Normal Worry 9

How to use this workbook

This premium edition builds on the standard programme by offering deeper exploration of each core topic, enriched with additional worked examples, guided practice exercises, and evidence-based techniques drawn from contemporary CBT, ACT, and mindfulness research. It incorporates the latest meta-analytic findings on health anxiety treatment, ensuring that every module is grounded in robust empirical evidence. The curriculum expands beyond the original eight modules, adding advanced cognitive strategies, systematic exposure to bodily sensations, and a comprehensive relapse-prevention plan. By integrating these elements, the course provides a thorough, step-by-step framework that empowers adults to manage health anxiety more effectively and sustain lasting change.

This workbook is the written form of the Managing Health Anxiety: Premium Guided Self-Help Programme 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 12 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

- By the end of this module, you will be able to clearly define health anxiety and distinguish it from normal health concerns or hypochondriasis. You will understand the key biological, psychological, and social factors that contribute to the development of your symptoms. You will identify your personal triggers, including specific bodily sensations, media exposure, or life events that spike your anxiety. You will map out the functional impact of your health anxiety on

your daily life, relationships, and work. You will complete a 'Personal History Timeline' using the free_reflection exercise to trace when your health worries began and how they have evolved, helping you see patterns rather than just isolated incidents. You will practice a 10-minute grounding exercise to observe physical sensations without judgment, preparing you for later modules. You will anticipate two common obstacles: feeling overwhelmed by the depth of your history (overcome by focusing on one decade at a time) and minimising your suffering (overcome by acknowledging that your distress is real and valid, not 'imaginary').

- By the end of this module you will be able to (1) recognise the automatic thoughts that arise when you notice a bodily sensation, (2) identify the underlying beliefs about health that give those thoughts power, (3) see how those thoughts trigger emotional and behavioural responses such as checking or reassurance-seeking, (4) use a simple cognitive-restructuring technique to challenge unhelpful interpretations, (5) understand the difference between realistic risk appraisal and catastrophic thinking, (6) create a personal thought-record to capture the link between situation, thought, feeling and behaviour, and (7) plan a short daily practice to test the new way of thinking before moving on. The module teaches the techniques of thought-identification, belief-mapping and basic cognitive restructuring, all of which are recommended in NICE guideline CG159 for health anxiety. The interactive exercise is a Thought Record because it provides a concrete, step-by-step format for spotting the trigger, the automatic thought, the associated belief and the resulting behaviour, helping you to see patterns and practice challenging them. Your practice before the next module is to complete a Thought Record for any health-related worry that occurs, spending about 10 minutes each day for the next five days (total 50 minutes). Two common obstacles are (a) difficulty noticing the exact thought in the moment – overcome this by keeping a small cue card or phone note reminding you to pause and write down what you were thinking, and (b) feeling overwhelmed by the emotional intensity of the worry – overcome this by first using a brief grounding technique (e.g., 5-second breathing) before filling in the record, which reduces distress and improves clarity.
- By the end of this module, you will understand that health anxiety is maintained by a self-reinforcing loop of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours rather than by the physical sensations themselves. You will be able to identify your specific 'triggers' (such as a racing heart or a news headline) and the resulting 'safety behaviours' (like excessive checking or avoidance) that keep the cycle going. You will learn to distinguish between the initial anxiety spike and the secondary anxiety caused by trying to control or suppress the first. The module teaches the technique of 'cycle mapping,' which involves tracing the sequence from trigger to behaviour to short-term relief and long-term maintenance. You will use the interactive 'thought_record' exercise to visually plot your personal anxiety loop, helping you see where you can intervene. You will practice a 10-minute 'cycle interruption' exercise before the next module, where you notice a trigger and choose a new, non-avoidant response. Two common obstacles are feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of your own patterns, which is overcome by focusing on just one specific trigger per day, and the fear that stopping safety behaviours will cause a health crisis, which is addressed by reviewing the evidence of your body's natural resilience and the temporary nature of anxiety spikes.
- By the end of this module, you will understand how catastrophic thinking distorts the meaning of normal bodily sensations and why the brain prioritises worst-case scenarios as a false safety mechanism. You will be able to identify specific cognitive distortions, such as magnification and mind-reading, within your own health-related thoughts. You will learn to use Socratic questioning to gather evidence for and against your fears, moving away from absolute certainty towards

probabilistic thinking. You will master the technique of 'defusing' from thoughts, recognising them as mental events rather than facts. You will utilise a thought_record to systematically break down the link between a physical symptom and a catastrophic interpretation. You will practice generating balanced, realistic alternative thoughts that acknowledge uncertainty without panic. You will complete a practice exercise before the next module: spend 10 minutes daily noting one bodily sensation and writing down the immediate catastrophic thought, then rating your anxiety level before and after challenging it.

- By the end of this module, you will understand how safety behaviours, such as excessive checking or avoidance, maintain health anxiety rather than protect you. You will be able to identify your specific 'safety behaviours' and link them to the catastrophic beliefs they reinforce. You will learn to formulate a clear, testable prediction for a behavioural experiment, distinguishing between what you think will happen and what actually happens. You will use the interactive thought_record exercise to structure your experiment, which helps you objectively record evidence against your fears. You will practice conducting a small, manageable experiment to reduce reliance on safety behaviours. You will complete a practice task of designing one experiment to run before the next module, taking approximately 15 minutes. You will learn to overcome the obstacle of 'it's not a fair test' by focusing on the process rather than the outcome, and the obstacle of feeling overwhelmed by starting with very small, low-risk steps.
- By the end of this module you will be able to (1) recognise which physical sensations are normal and which are being amplified by health anxiety; (2) explain how mindful, non-judgemental attention can break the cycle of catastrophic interpretation; (3) practise a short body-scan meditation that helps you observe sensations without immediately trying to label them as dangerous; (4) use the "free_reflection" exercise to record what you notice in your body and the thoughts that arise, so you can see patterns over time; (5) apply the "label-and-let-go" technique to gently name an alarm thought and release it without acting on it; (6) set up a daily 10-minute mindful body-awareness practice to build a balanced relationship with your bodily cues before moving on to the next module; (7) anticipate two common obstacles – (a) the mind wandering away from the body, which can be managed by gently returning attention to the breath as an anchor, and (b) the urge to judge sensations as "bad" or "dangerous", which can be overcome by using self-compassion statements such as "I am safe right now and I can notice this feeling without fear".
- By the end of this module you will be able to: (1) recognise how online health information and social media can amplify health anxiety; (2) evaluate the credibility of medical websites and distinguish trustworthy sources; (3) set clear boundaries for health-related internet use, including timed searches and safe-search strategies; (4) communicate effectively with health professionals to obtain reassurance without excessive appointments; (5) enlist supportive friends or family members in a balanced way and ask for help when needed; (6) apply a simple thought-recording technique to capture and challenge alarmist interpretations of digital content; (7) plan a personal digital-use schedule that reduces rumination. The module teaches the techniques of source-evaluation, scheduled information-checking, assertive communication, and supportive-network planning. You will complete a free_reflection exercise where you write briefly about a recent online health search, what you felt, and how you could have responded differently; this helps you become aware of triggers and practice alternative responses. Before the next module, spend 10 minutes each day for three days creating a "digital health-check schedule" and sticking to the allotted time, recording any urges to exceed it. Two common

obstacles are: (a) the habit of compulsive scrolling, which can be overcome by using a timer app and placing the device out of reach during scheduled breaks; and (b) feeling unheard by doctors, which can be addressed by preparing a concise list of questions beforehand and using the "Ask-Tell-Ask" communication model.

- By the end of this module you will be able to explain what cognitive reframing means and how it can change the meaning you give to bodily sensations. You will understand the core Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) ideas of acceptance, cognitive defusion and living in line with personal values, and how they complement traditional CBT for health anxiety. You will learn three practical techniques: (1) reframing health-related thoughts into balanced alternatives, (2) using a simple acceptance exercise to notice urges to avoid or control sensations without acting on them, and (3) identifying and committing to one value-driven action each day. You will complete a free_reflection exercise where you write briefly about a recent health-related worry, explore the underlying value it may be protecting, and note a small, value-consistent step you could take – this helps you connect thoughts, emotions and actions in a meaningful way. Before moving on to the next module you will practice a 10-minute daily "Values-Action Log": each day write down one value-based activity you chose, what you did, and how it felt, to reinforce the habit of acting on what matters rather than on fear. Two common obstacles are (a) feeling that acceptance means giving up control – you can overcome this by reminding yourself that acceptance is about observing thoughts, not surrendering to them, and practising the short "watch-and-let-go" exercise for 2 minutes when urges arise; and (b) slipping back into catastrophising when reframing feels forced – you can counter this by first writing the original catastrophic thought, then gently adding a realistic alternative, and checking the new statement against evidence before accepting it.
- By the end of this module you will understand why deliberately experiencing physical sensations can reduce health-related fear, be able to build a personal hierarchy of bodily sensations, conduct systematic desensitisation exercises safely, distinguish normal bodily signals from anxiety-driven catastrophising, use grounding and paced-breathing techniques to stay present during exposure, and monitor your anxiety levels to track progress. The module teaches systematic exposure, graded hierarchy construction, interoceptive exposure, and relaxation/grounding strategies. You will complete a free_reflection exercise after each exposure session to note the thoughts, feelings and physical reactions you experienced and why this reflection helps consolidate learning. Before the next module you will practise a 10-minute daily exposure to the lowest-level sensation on your hierarchy, rating your anxiety before and after each session. Two common obstacles are (1) avoidance of uncomfortable sensations – overcome by committing to a set schedule, using a timer and reminding yourself that avoidance reinforces fear – and (2) a surge of anxiety during exposure leading to stopping – overcome by employing paced breathing, grounding techniques and self-compassionate statements to stay engaged.
- By the end of this module you will be able to recognise how uncertainty and ongoing health stressors can trigger health anxiety; identify your personal patterns of worry when faced with life events or chronic illness; apply the uncertainty-tolerance technique to reduce the need for excessive checking; use values-based activity planning to stay engaged in meaningful activities despite health concerns; and create a realistic contingency plan for health-related setbacks. The module teaches uncertainty exposure, values-guided activity scheduling and compassionate self-talk. You will complete a free_reflection exercise to explore your feelings about recent or anticipated health-related events and link them to your core values, because reflecting

consolidates learning and strengthens motivation. Before the next module, spend 10 minutes each day for a week practising the “uncertainty ladder” – gradually exposing yourself to mildly uncertain health situations and noting your anxiety level. Two common obstacles are (a) the urge to avoid uncertainty by seeking reassurance, which can be managed by scheduling brief reassurance windows and sticking to them, and (b) feeling overwhelmed by chronic-illness fatigue, which can be addressed by breaking activities into very small, timed steps and celebrating each completion.

PART 1

Understanding Health Anxiety: Foundations and Personal History

Exploring the roots, triggers, and personal impact of health anxiety

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to the Managing Health Anxiety Programme

Welcome to the first module of the Managing Health Anxiety: Premium Guided Self-Help Programme. This twelve-module course is designed to help you understand, challenge and gradually reduce the intense worry you may feel about your health. Over the coming weeks you will learn evidence-based strategies drawn from cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and mindfulness research – all of which have strong support in the scientific literature for reducing health-related anxiety.

In this opening module we will focus on building a solid foundation. You will learn how health anxiety differs from normal health concerns and from older terms such as hypochondriasis. You will also explore the biological, psychological and social factors that can make health worries more likely to develop and persist. By mapping your personal triggers – the bodily sensations, media messages or life events that set off your anxiety – you will start to see patterns that can be addressed in later modules.

A key part of this module is the ‘Personal History Timeline’ exercise. By reflecting on when your health worries first appeared and how they have changed over time, you will gain a clearer picture of the story your anxiety tells you. This perspective is essential for the systematic exposure and cognitive techniques that follow.

Remember, this programme is a step-by-step guide. You are not expected to master everything at once; each module builds on the last, and you will have the chance to revisit and refine skills as you progress. Let’s begin the journey towards a calmer, more balanced relationship with your health.

CHAPTER 2

What is Health Anxiety? Defining the Problem and How It Differs from Normal Worry

Welcome to the first module of the Managing Health Anxiety: Premium Guided Self-Help Programme. Over the next twelve weeks you will be guided step-by-step through evidence-based strategies drawn from cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and mindfulness. Each module builds on the last, helping you to understand, challenge and change the patterns that keep health anxiety alive. In this opening psycho-educational block we will lay the foundations: what health anxiety actually is, how it differs from ordinary health-related worry, and the key biological, psychological and social factors that contribute to its development.

Health anxiety, sometimes called illness anxiety disorder in the DSM-5, is characterised by a persistent preoccupation with having or acquiring a serious illness despite medical reassurance. The preoccupation can dominate thoughts for many hours each day, leading to repeated checking of bodily sensations, excessive online searching, and frequent medical appointments. Importantly, the anxiety is disproportionate to the level of risk – a minor headache may be interpreted as a brain tumour, a fleeting stomach ache as cancer, and so on. The distress is real, and the behaviours that follow can interfere with work, relationships and overall quality of life.

How does this differ from normal health concerns? Everyone experiences occasional worry about health – for example, feeling uneasy after a night of heavy drinking or wondering whether a sore throat is a cold. Normal worry is typically brief, proportionate to the situation, and resolves when new information (e.g., a doctor's reassurance) is received. In health anxiety, the worry is chronic, resistant to reassurance, and often escalates after each reassurance episode. This paradox – seeking reassurance yet feeling more anxious afterwards – is a hallmark of the condition.

The scientific literature points to three interacting domains that give rise to health anxiety:

1. Biological factors – Genetic predisposition plays a modest role; twin studies suggest a heritability of around 30 %. Neurobiologically, heightened interoceptive sensitivity – the brain's ability to detect internal bodily signals – can make ordinary sensations feel threatening. Dysregulated stress hormones (cortisol) may also amplify threat perception.

2. Psychological factors – Cognitive biases such as catastrophising ("If I feel a twinge, it must be a tumour"), selective attention to bodily cues, and intolerance of uncertainty are consistently reported. Learning theory explains how past experiences (e.g., a serious illness in the family) can condition a person to associate bodily sensations with danger.

3. Social factors – Cultural messages about health, media exposure to disease outbreaks, and family dynamics that reinforce health-focused monitoring all contribute. For instance, growing up in a household where illness was discussed in alarmist terms can embed a hyper-vigilant stance.

A NOTE

Tip: When you notice a health-related thought, pause and ask yourself: Is this thought proportionate to the evidence I have? A quick reality-check can interrupt the automatic escalation of worry.

To illustrate these concepts, let's walk through a worked example.

Sarah, a 34-year-old teacher, began feeling a tightness in her chest after a stressful exam period. She Googled the symptom and read about heart attacks, which triggered a cascade of thoughts: "I'm having a heart attack; I'll die; my family will be left alone." She visited her GP, who performed an ECG and reassured her that her heart was healthy. Instead of feeling relieved, Sarah's anxiety intensified – she thought, "What if the doctor missed something?" Over the next months she booked three more appointments, each time leaving more anxious than before. In retrospect, Sarah's experience reflects the three domains: a genetic predisposition to anxiety, a cognitive bias towards catastrophising, and a social environment where health news is constantly highlighted.

Understanding that health anxiety is a maintained problem – not a one-off reaction – helps you see why simple reassurance is insufficient. The brain has learned a pattern: threat cue › anxiety › reassurance › temporary relief › renewed threat cue. Breaking this loop requires both knowledge (what is happening) and skills (how to respond). In the next block we will start mapping your own personal history and triggers, giving you a concrete picture of where the pattern began for you.

By the end of this block you should be able to:

- Define health anxiety and differentiate it from normal worry.
- Recognise the biological, psychological and social contributors.
- Identify the paradox of reassurance-seeking.
- Apply a simple tip to evaluate the proportionality of health-related thoughts.

These foundations set the stage for the deeper work ahead – exploring your own timeline, spotting triggers, and gradually building a more balanced relationship with your body and health information.