

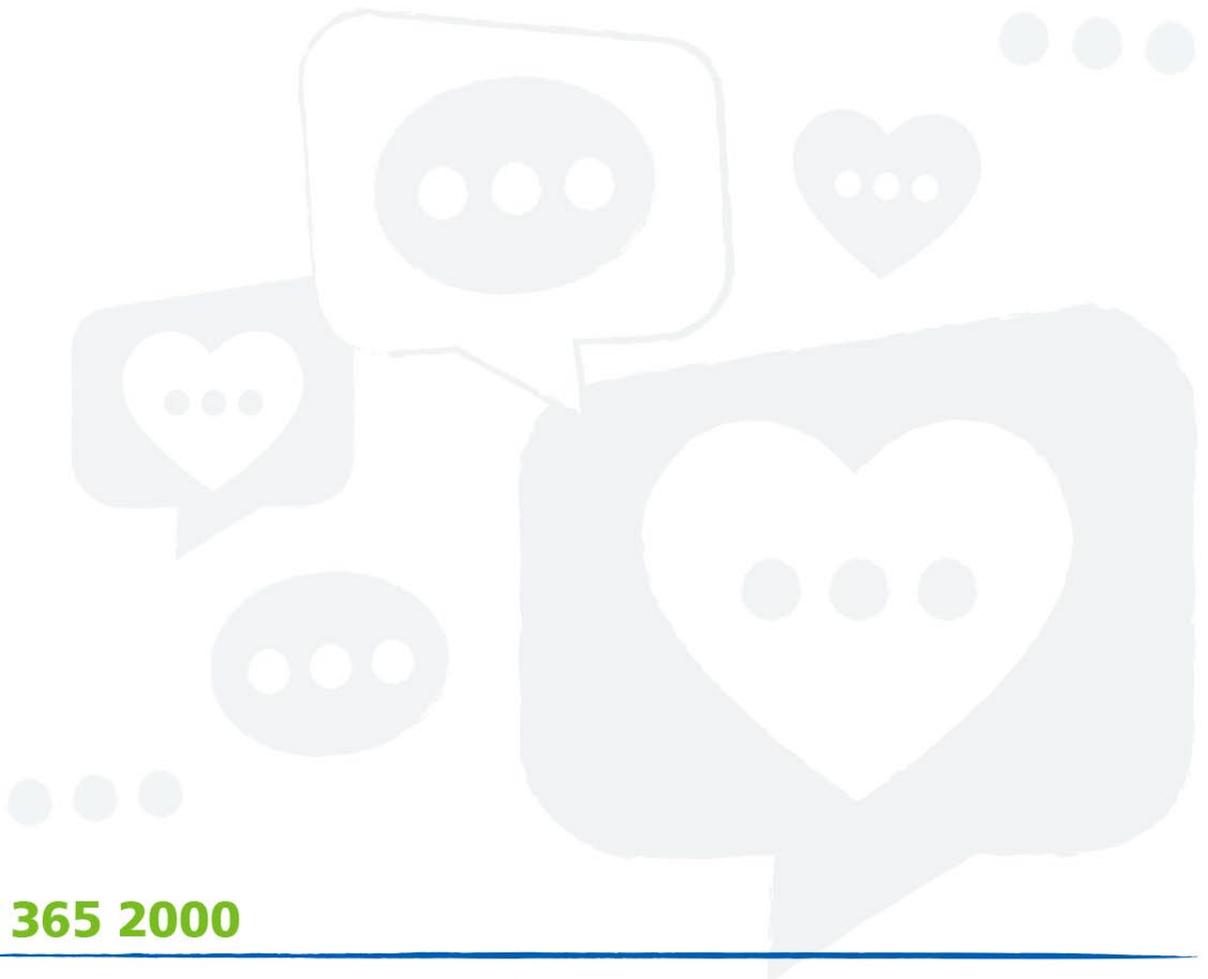


Talking Therapies
Workbook...

Workbook 4

Health anxiety

A self-help guide



 **0300 365 2000**

Contents of this booklet

❑ What is health anxiety?.....	3
❑ The vicious cycle of health anxiety.....	5
❑ Misinterpretation of symptoms.....	6
❑ Activity.....	7
❑ Monitoring your symptoms.....	8
❑ Facing your fears.....	9
❑ Safety behaviours.....	11
❑ Graded exposure.....	12
❑ Graded hierarchy.....	14
❑ My exposure diary.....	16
❑ Notes.....	17
❑ Further resources.....	19
❑ Useful contacts.....	20



As you work through the booklet, feel free to make notes on page 17.

What is health anxiety?

Anxiety is often considered as our response to a threatening situation. We can have this response to a perceived threat as well as to a physical threat in the here and now. This response is sometimes referred to as the 'fight or flight' response.

Health anxiety can include a fear of having a serious illness or the belief that you already have a serious illness.

We all worry about our health from time to time, for example if we had to go into hospital for an operation, or if we were to be called by our doctor following tests. Worrying about our health can even lead us to improve our lifestyle, for example, to give up smoking or to follow a healthy diet.

Health worries become a problem when they get in the way of normal life even if there is no clear evidence that anything is seriously wrong.

Examples:

- Fear that a physical symptom is due to **a serious illness**
- **Worrying about your health** to the point that it affects how you live your life
- **Physical anxiety symptoms** such as an increased heart rate or stomach upset
- **Seeking reassurance** from friends, family and health professionals
- **Checking** or scanning your body for symptoms
- **Avoiding things** that remind you of illness or that may make you ill
- Fear that your serious illness could **not be cured** by modern medicine
- Fear that being unwell would mean **a loss of dignity and quality of life**



What can trigger health anxiety?

The reasons you may struggle with health anxiety, may include:

Stress

Stress and anxiety are often linked as their physical responses are similar. When we're already stressed or anxious, we instinctively become more aware of possible threats which can lead us to focus on potential threats to our health.

Extra responsibility (e.g. having your first child)

When we become responsible for something or someone other than ourselves, our anxiety can focus on what would happen if something were to happen to us e.g. What would happen to the children?

Someone you know suffering from serious illness

The more we're exposed to something like illness or death, the more we can overestimate the likelihood of ourselves becoming ill as this then appears to be more common than it may actually be. This could be from someone you know having an illness or condition, or from learning about it on TV or radio.

Experiencing a serious illness or unexplained medical symptoms yourself

Health anxiety is not only for people who are 'healthy'. Sometimes people with existing or undiagnosed illnesses can experience this too. Whether you are healthy or not is not the main difficulty with health anxiety, it is more about the extent to which we are pre-occupied with worry about this and what we do to try and manage these worries such as avoiding things or checking symptoms frequently.

Reflect

Take a moment to reflect on what could trigger **your** health anxiety and write this below.

.....

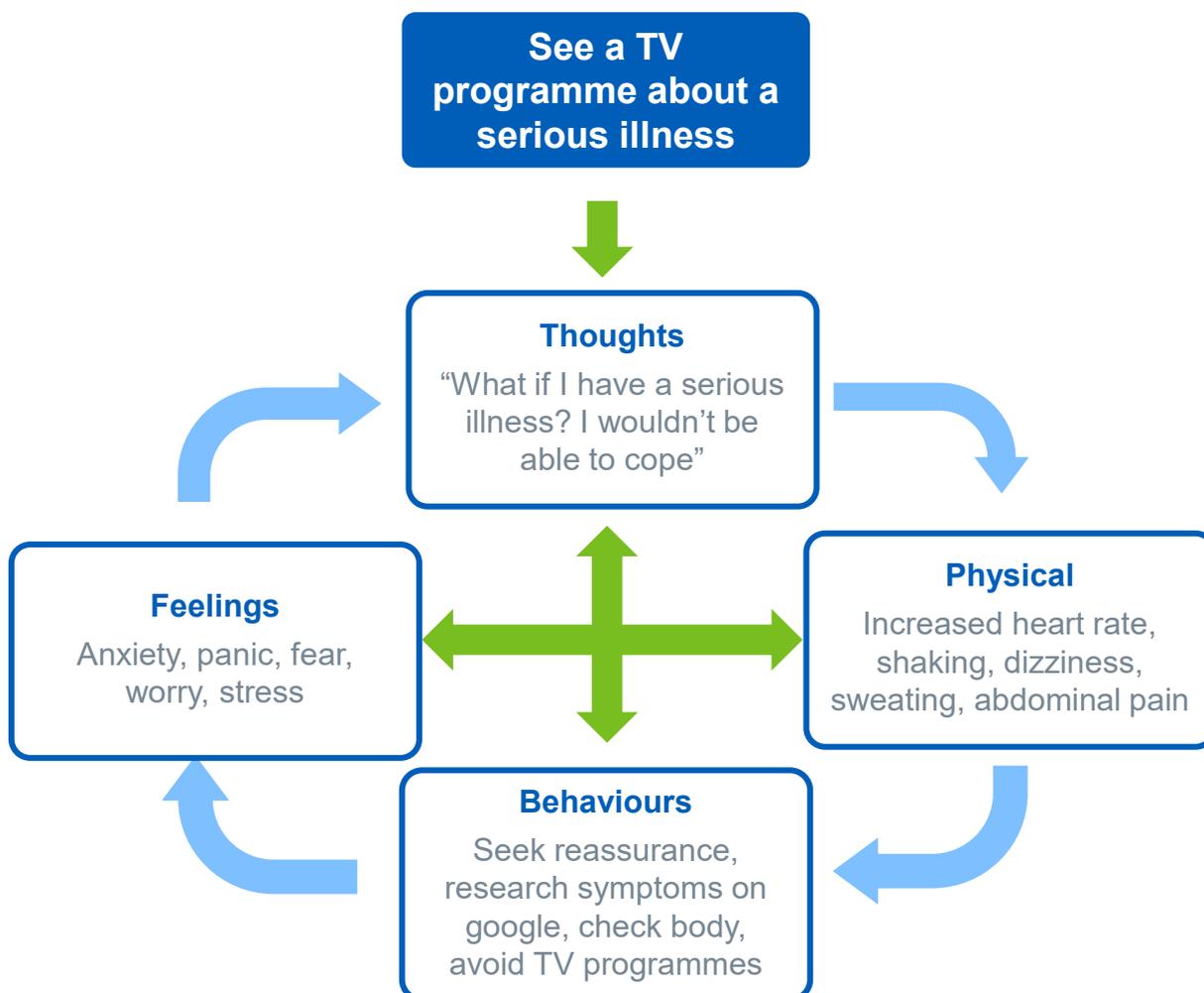
.....

.....

.....

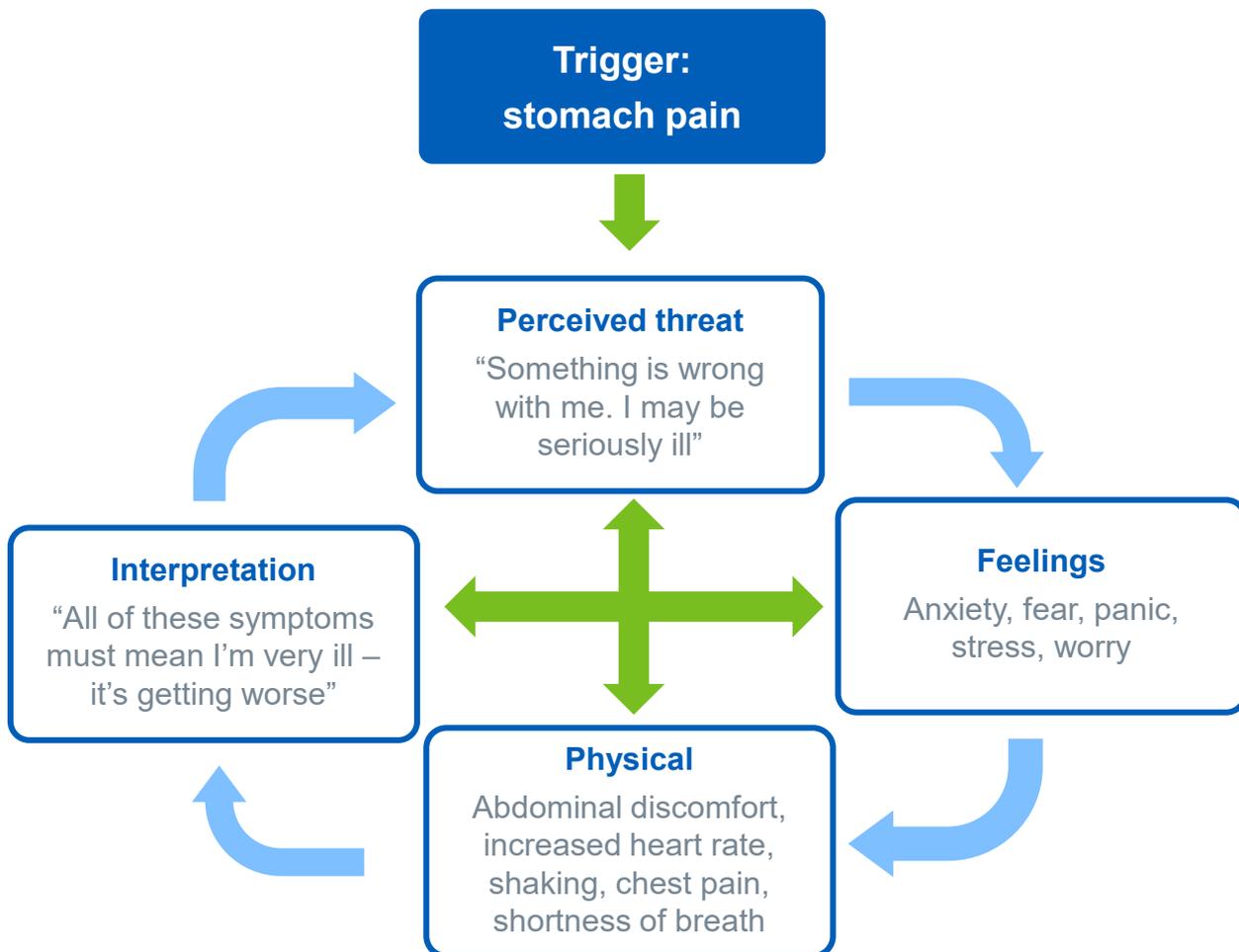
The vicious cycle of health anxiety

See below a hot cross bun example for someone struggling with health anxiety.



Misinterpretation of symptoms

This example shows how symptoms can be misinterpreted.



When we experience health anxiety, we tend to spend a lot of time focusing on particular parts of our body, usually the area we are most concerned about.

For example, someone who might worry that they have mouth cancer, may spend a lot of time looking inside their mouth in the mirror or when doing other activities such as brushing their teeth. When we're so focused on one area of the body we're going to notice every single sensation or change – most of which will be completely normal sensations or changes that your body makes every day.

Activity

Try focusing on your big toe for one minute.

Reflect

What feelings or sensations did you notice?

.....

.....

.....

.....

Did you notice things you haven't thought about before?

.....

.....

.....

.....

Hopefully this has demonstrated that when we spend too much time focusing on one body part, we will naturally notice changes and new sensations which are normal. Therefore, if your health anxiety means you focus on one part of your body, you might just be noticing normal changes as opposed to problem changes that otherwise you would have not picked up on.

When you notice yourself doing this, try to focus your attention away from your body. Ask your practitioner for some grounding techniques which might help.



Monitoring your symptoms

A useful way to identify your thoughts and behaviours is to keep a record of them and the level of anxiety or distress they cause you.

Use the record diary below to monitor your symptoms.

Day/ time	Situation/trigger	Thoughts/worries	Behaviours	Anxiety level (0-10)

Facing your fears

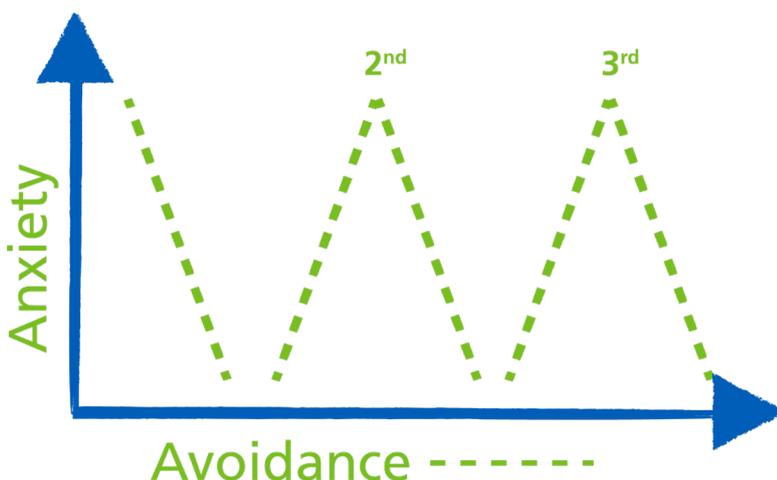
What do you think would happen?

What would happen to your anxiety if you faced a feared situation and stayed in it without using any unhelpful behaviours?

Most people would say that they wouldn't be able to cope. The anxiety would just keep rising until eventually something terrible happens such as passing out or having a heart attack. We know this is in fact not the case.

There is a release of adrenaline when we become anxious which can impact our physical responses. But we also know that we can only produce so much of this. The physical symptoms will eventually reduce, once the adrenaline does.

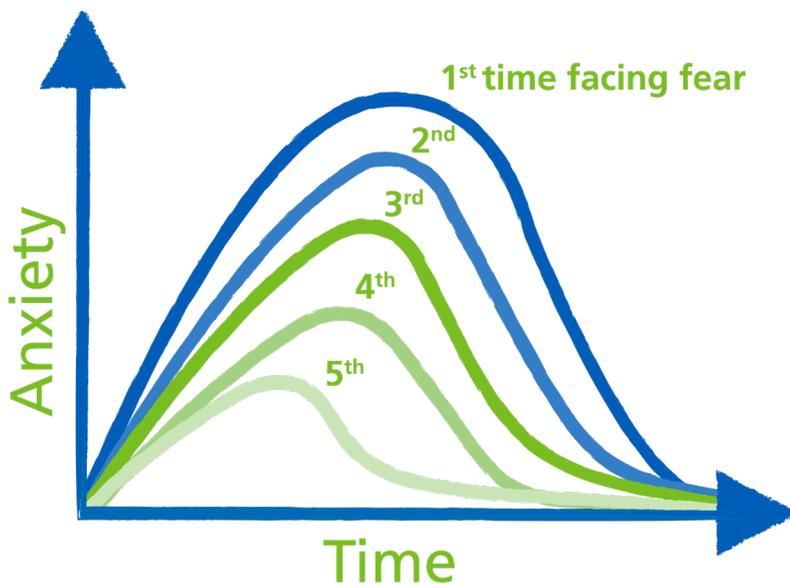
The graph below shows what happens when we face an anxiety-provoking situation and our response is to leave or avoid the situation or use unhelpful behaviours to cope. Each time we face that same situation our anxiety is equally high the next time round:



Facing your fears

What would actually happen?

This graph shows what would actually happen if we were to face an anxiety-provoking situation without the support of unhelpful behaviours.



As you can see, anxiety goes up quickly when entering a feared situation, but with time (usually after approximately twenty minutes) will go down again. The very first time you do this your anxiety will be at its highest. However, the second time you face the feared situation you will find that your anxiety has reduced, and the third time your anxiety will be even lower.

With repeated exposure to the same feared situations, your anxiety will become progressively less severe and more tolerable. This process is known as **desensitisation** or **habituation**, where the situation is so familiar that it no longer appears threatening.

What are safety behaviours?

Avoidance can come in many forms. Sometimes we do not escape or avoid the situation entirely but instead we start to adopt unhelpful behaviours that help us to feel safer in that situation. These are called **safety behaviours**.

Some examples we see in health anxiety include:

- Going to the GP surgery very often for reassurance (or avoiding going at all)
- Googling symptoms
- Avoiding medical programmes or the news (or watching them to try and find those with a positive outcome)
- Reassurance seeking from friends and family
- Checking our body for changes and sensations

Safety behaviours can appear helpful in the short term. However they also maintain our anxiety. This is because we believe that the reason we're able to get by is because of the safety behaviour. We miss out on the opportunity to learn that there was no threat or that we're able to cope on our own if faced with a challenge.

Reflect

Can you relate to any of the above?

.....

.....

.....

.....

To overcome anxiety you will need to actively let go of your safety behaviours and confront the situations that you have been avoiding. The thought of letting go of these behaviours may make you feel very anxious. However by experiencing the anxiety-provoking situation without the help of these behaviours and facing the situation, you will begin to realise that you are able to cope with it.

Graded exposure

What is graded exposure?

Graded exposure is a technique that works by breaking down our feared situations and confronting them gradually.

Using a graded exposure hierarchy, we start with situations that are less anxiety provoking and work up to more difficult situations. This helps us learn that anxiety levels do come down if we stay in the situation and don't use safety behaviours.

See a graded hierarchy example on **page 14**.

The four rules of graded exposure

- **Rule 1 – Graded**

Exposure to anxiety-provoking situations must be graded in order of least to most anxiety-provoking.

- **Rule 2 – Prolonged**

You need to ensure that your exposure to the situation is prolonged. This means that you need to stay in that situation until your anxiety has reduced by at least 50%.

- **Rule 3 – Repeated**

Repeat each exposure activity until your anxiety rating from the start of the exercise has reduced by 50%. Once you've achieved this, you can then move up to the next exercise on your hierarchy.

- **Rule 4 – Without distraction**

It's important when using this technique to be aware of any safety behaviours that you are doing, or anything that could distract you from the anxiety. It's important to truly feel the anxiety in order to learn that your anxiety levels will reduce. If it feels too difficult to drop safety behaviours initially, then you could start off by including them on the lower levels of your hierarchy and gradually removing them.

Graded exposure step by step

Step 1 – Plan your hierarchy

Make a list of situations you avoid because of your health anxiety. Rate how anxious or uncomfortable those situations make you feel on a scale of 0-100 (with 100 being maximum anxiety). Add these to the [template on page 15](#) to make your graded hierarchy. Start with the easiest or least anxiety-provoking situations at the bottom, working up to the most anxiety-provoking at the top.

Step 2 – Begin graded exposure

The next step is to start deliberately exposing yourself to the situations that you're avoiding. Start with the easiest situation and keep repeating the same step until your anxiety has at least improved by 50%.

Make sure you follow the [4 rules of graded exposure from page 12](#).

Step 3 – Complete an exposure diary

While completing your graded exposure, use [the exposure diary on page 16](#) to record how you find it.

Step 4 – Review and continue

Keep working up the graded hierarchy, recording your progress as you go.



Graded hierarchy example

See below an example of a graded hierarchy for someone struggling with health anxiety.

Situations	Anxiety (0-100)
Watch a charity programme focused on illness (e.g. comic relief)	100
Speak to someone about their experience of a serious illness	95
Watch a programme where someone is seriously ill	90
Listen to a song about someone who had a serious illness	75
Sit in a GP surgery or hospice where people could be seriously ill	60
Listen to a person talk about their illness on the radio	45
Watch an illness charity advert (e.g. Cancer research)	35

My exposure diary

Fill in this exposure diary before and after you have placed yourself in an anxiety provoking situation. This can help you track your progress and notice improvements over time.

Date & Time	Duration (minutes)	Situation	Anxiety Rating (0-100)			Comments
			Before the exposure	At the start of the exposure	End of the exposure	

Further resources



Workbooks

Centre for Clinical Interventions (CCI) – <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/>

A range of detailed resources and PDF workbooks available to download for free focusing on a range of depression and anxiety related difficulties

Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS – <https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>

Self-help guides free to download by PDF and print on a range of difficulties including anxiety and depression

Smartphone apps (found on Apple and Google Play store)

WRAP – Wellness recovery action app

Mood Tools – Depression aid

Fear Tools – Anxiety kit

Insight Timer – Meditation app

Websites

Mind – <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

Mental Health Foundation – <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/>

NHS – <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/>

Useful contacts...



Talking Therapies:

0300 365 2000

(Open 8am to 8pm Monday to Thursday
8am to 5pm Friday)

Email:

talkingtherapies@berkshire.nhs.uk

Other contacts:

Berkshire Crisis Team:

0800 129 9999

(24 hours, specialist service for
immediate mental health crisis)

Samaritans:

116 123

(24 hours, confidential listening service)

NHS Direct / out of hours:

111

(24 hours, physical and mental
health concerns)

In an emergency always call 999

