

Breaking the Health Anxiety Cycle Five habits that feed it

Why checking and searching make health worries louder, and what to do instead.

Everyone worries about their health sometimes. **Health anxiety** is when the worry about having a serious illness becomes stuck and takes over. The paradox is that the things people do to calm it, like googling, getting more tests and asking again, feed it. Each one gives a moment of relief and teaches your brain that it needs more reassurance next time.

THE HEALTH ANXIETY CYCLE



The relief is short, so the loop starts again, usually with a stronger urge to check than before.

WHAT FEEDS IT, AND WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

THE HABIT	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE	WHAT TO TRY INSTEAD
1. Searching for meaning	"Why do I feel this? It must mean something."	Say: "This is a sensation." Let it be there without needing to know why. Thoughts and sensations pass, and they do not always mean something.
2. Catastrophizing	"I'm tired, so I must have a terrible disease."	Label it: "That's the catastrophe voice." Keep a list of your usual health fears, so you can see them as fears, not facts.
3. Googling symptoms	Scanning the internet for proof one way or the other.	For a new symptom, see a doctor once. Put a time limit on any searching, then redirect to something meaningful.
4. Extra tests	Another scan or another opinion, just in case.	Agree one plan with your doctor for what is worth checking, then stick to it. More reassurance calms worry briefly but teaches it to ask for more.
5. Demanding certainty	"I have to know for sure."	Accept uncertainty: "I can't know for sure. I've checked enough. I'm going to live my life."

A PLAN FOR THIS WEEK

1 Write your fears as fears. List your top health worries. Next to each, write: "This is a worry, not a fact."

2 Set a checking limit. Count how many times a day you search or check now. Set a limit a little below that, write it down, and lower it each week.

3 Plan your redirect. Decide in advance what you will do when the limit is up: a walk, a call, a task you care about.

A QUESTION TO ASK

"Does this worry help me live a rich and meaningful life?" If not, say "Hello, anxiety, nice to see you again," and turn back to what matters: your kid's game, your work, the people you are with. Notice how many hours the checking is taking from you.

TWO CAUTIONS

- New or changing symptoms deserve a real checkup.** Tell your clinician. The goal is to stop the endless rechecking, not to ignore your health.
- If it feels like OCD,** with rituals and rules you have to follow, work with a clinician rather than using this sheet on your own. Follow normal public health advice, such as washing your hands when you are sick, and do not add extra rules.

Source. Adapted and rewritten from the Therapy in a Nutshell video "5 Ways to Stop the Health Anxiety Cycle" by Emma McAdam, LMFT.

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