

## Coping with Physical Ill Health & Worrying About your Health

This worksheet will help you understand the mental stress and distress that may be associated with your physical health problem, including such things as heart or lung disease; diabetes; cancer; arthritis or any long-term or chronic illness. It will also help you cope when medical investigation has not shown physical disease yet you continue to worry about illness and feel unwell.

First, think about the way that people react when they are ill or off colour. There is a range of different things we normally do. As well as going to the doctor, we may:

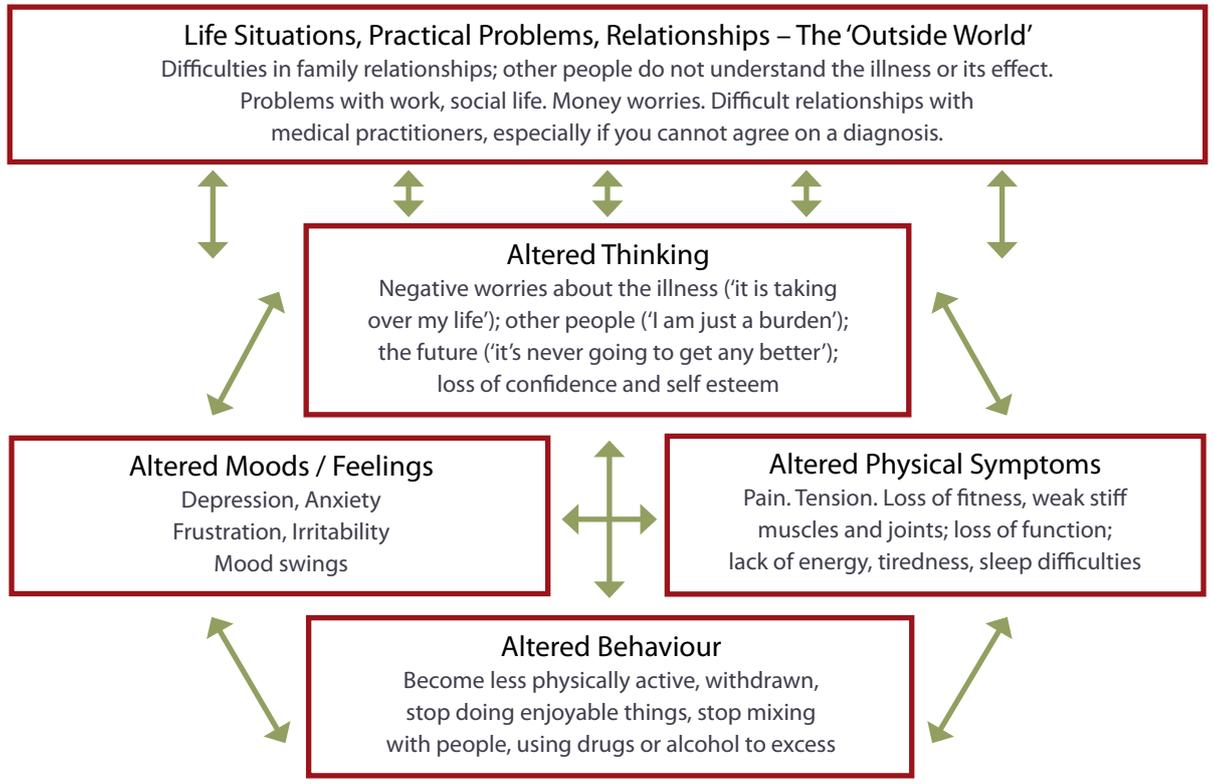
- Reduce or stop what we are doing and stay at home. We may also stop doing core tasks around the house such as cleaning or cooking for a time.
- Wear different clothes such as pyjamas, loose fitting clothes or dressing gowns.
- Eat and drink different foods. This might include "bland" foods such as toast. We may drink

"energy-filled" drinks or avoid certain food or drink altogether.

- Expect others to help us out – perhaps by making us food and bringing us drinks. Often other people also change how they behave towards us, perhaps becoming more attentive, or perhaps less attentive or even avoiding contact altogether if the problem has been going on for a long time.

How do YOU respond when you are feeling ill, or worse than usual if you have a chronic health problem? How do other people respond to you? Is what you or they do helpful or unhelpful?

This leaflet uses the 5 AREAS diagram to help you understand the effects that your physical health problem is having on you (Your guide can give you a separate leaflet to help you complete your own 5 Areas review). Can you recognise anything of yourself in the 5 Areas diagram below?



Sometimes we become over-sensitive to our symptoms and misinterpret everyday symptoms as evidence of things getting worse, often leading to a change in our behaviour such as doing even less, or seeking reassurance from our doctor or family member.

> How Normal Stress, Depression & Anxiety Can Develop into a Problem'

Related leaflets include:  
> Anxiety – A 'Five Areas' Model  
> Depression – A 'Five Areas' Model  
> Stress – A 'Five Areas' Model

- > Anxiety - A 'Five Areas' Model
- > Coping with Chronic Pain
- > Depression - A Five Areas' Model

- > Distraction
- > Relaxation
- > Relaxed Breathing
- > Recognising / Changing Unhelpful Thinking & Behaviour (several leaflets)

## Coping with Physical Ill Health & Worrying About your Health

Contd.

Worrying about your health (Health Anxiety)

In health anxiety, worrying thoughts are focused upon a fear of physical health problems. The person feels ill, and believes they have a potentially dangerous disease. Because what they think affects how they feel emotionally and physically, they feel anxious and notice a number of the physical symptoms of anxiety. Because what they believe also affects what they do, they understandably go to see the doctor.

These reactions are all very similar to a normal response to illness. The key difference here is that there is either no physical disorder present at all, or the extent of physical disorder cannot explain why they feel so ill. In spite of normal physical investigations and tests, the person is not reassured. Reassurance in fact just makes things worse. They go again and again to the doctor and are often referred on to other health care practitioners for further reassurance. Throughout this they continue to feel ill.

Health anxiety is usually caused by a combination of factors:

- a. The person is overly aware of normal symptoms in the body. They may also misinterpret symptoms of everyday common diseases such as colds as evidence of severe ill health. For example, if you are concerned about having a brain tumour, you will be particularly aware whenever you have a headache or feel fuzzy headed. Because these fears cause tension you may also notice tension headaches. These will then reinforce your fears. If you are concerned about bowel disease you will be aware of any gurgle or bowel pain, and know exactly when you last used the toilet / how your motions appeared etc.
- b. People with health anxiety are prone to misinterpret information from health care practitioners, magazines and the media.

Even slight comments from someone such as "you look pale" are seized upon and worried about.

- c. Because of their health concerns, the person goes again and again seeking reassurance from their doctor or other health care practitioner. Yet they are not reassured by the normal results of physical tests.

What can be done about worrying about your health?

The aim of helping you to cope with your worries about your health is NOT to make your symptoms disappear. Changes in the body and in physical symptoms are perfectly normal, especially if you have long term physical health problems. Instead, the aim of self-help is for you to STOP WORRYING about symptoms that you cannot change, or that don't signify anything serious is wrong with you. Your guide will help you make use of other leaflets that encourage you to recognise and change your unhelpful thinking and behaviour. You can learn to:-

1. Look for other explanations for your symptoms
2. Accept that some symptoms are normal in your present state of health
3. Learn that constantly seeking reassurance is often unhelpful
4. Recognise that constantly monitoring your health may make worry and anxiety worse
5. Recognise that behaving as if you are ill (e.g. staying in bed, avoiding exercise or certain foods) can make worry and anxiety worse.
6. Use skills such as relaxation; relaxed breathing; distraction; changing unhelpful thinking and changing unhelpful behaviour.

There is a list on the left side of this leaflet with suggestions about other leaflets that might be helpful. Talk to your guide about which leaflet to read next.

