

A Review on Health Anxiety Disorder

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EDITORIAL

Although many people occasionally experience worries about their health, for the majority of people, it does not impact daily life. However, in a small percentage of the population, fear and anxiety about illness can become an overwhelming and highly distressing problem. This condition is called health anxiety disorder, also known as hypochondriasis.

Signs and symptoms

Individuals with health anxiety disorder have an obsessional concern that they are currently (or will be in the future) experiencing a serious physical illness, despite reassurance from medical professionals that they are healthy.

Such anxieties can cause people to obsess over their bodily processes, sensations and abnormalities. Many people with this disorder tend to worry about the function of a particular vital organ, such as the heart, or the risk of developing a well-known illness, such as cancer or a brain tumor.

Health-related fears are often worsened by the physical symptoms that develop as a consequence of anxiety, such as an elevated heart rate, chest pain, nausea and sweating, which are mis-interpreted as indicators of a serious medical condition.

Other obsessional behaviors typically seen in people with health anxiety include constant checking for new symptoms, repeated visits to the doctor, and frequent researching on the internet about the signs and side-effects associated with a suspected illness.

Treatment

In some cases, health anxiety disorder can become a major issue, negatively impacting an individual's wellbeing, social-life and ability to work due to the overwhelming fear of becoming ill.

Individuals who think they may suffer with this disorder are initially advised to try methods of self-help and support groups to overcome their fears. However, if such anxieties persist, referral from the doctor for cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is recommended.

It is possible to suffer with both anxiety and a serious illness, therefore all physical disorders must be ruled out by a medical professional before any treatment for health anxiety is carried out.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Commonly used to treat many different types of anxiety and depression, CBT is a talking therapy that focuses on cognition, feelings and behavior to help patients to change their thought patterns and consequent behaviors associated with a condition.

CBT is based on the idea that our thoughts about a situation (e.g. the fear of a heart attack) influence both how we feel (e.g. fearful and anxious) and how we behave (e.g. checking for symptoms, researching on the internet, or repeated trips to the doctor).

By breaking down unrealistic or unhelpful thoughts and instead thinking about them in a rational way, individuals can learn to cope better with anxiety-provoking situations.

Research indicates that CBT is generally a very effective treatment for health anxiety disorder, and evidence has shown that improvements in anxiety-related symptoms can be sustained for up to two years after the initial treatment.

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