

[If coronavirus scares you, read this to take control over your health anxiety](#)

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A pandemic is fertile ground for those who suffer from anxiety - here's a short guide on how to manage it



A couple gazes over Lake Washington in Kirkland, Washington. As the coronavirus pandemic has spread, officials have advised social distancing from crowds to avoid contracting COVID-19. Photograph: John Moore/Getty Images

When news of the coronavirus broke at the end of last year, and as the stories from the outbreak became more alarming over time, I found myself wondering how

health anxiety sufferers were coping.

You see, I used to be one. In late 2015, I suffered a post-traumatic stress disorder relapse which led to debilitating anxiety, much of which was health related. During that period, I was paralyzed by the thought of becoming ill and dying. I was constantly checking for symptoms and signs of disease online and I was fixated on the health of my loved ones. After treatment, including trauma-focused CBT, I almost completely recovered. But I remember vividly how it felt to be in an all-consuming state of panic. For many months, it ruled my entire existence. Approximately 40 million American adults – roughly 18% of the population – have an anxiety disorder, while in the UK there were 8.2 million cases of anxiety in 2013. There are few statistics about health anxiety, but it can affect those who have an existing anxiety disorder or those who have experienced a life event such as bereavement, birth trauma or an accident. In times like these, where a global pandemic is taking up most of the media conversation, it can be even more difficult to stay calm.

Here is some advice that may give some comfort to those of you who are struggling.

1) Avoid the (health-related) news

We all want to keep up to date, but when you have health anxiety the need to check and read the latest updates can become compulsive, feeding the anxiety. Try having a news detox or allocating yourself a time limit for reading or watching news. If you're really worried about missing something crucial, you can always tell friends and family to contact you in the event of an emergency in order to keep you informed.

2) Try not to seek constant reassurance

Seeking reassurance can make you feel calmer for a little while, but in my experience, it is always temporary. Your brain creates a feedback cycle where you become increasingly reliant on reassurance, which only serves to reinforce the anxiety. It's natural to want your loved ones to tell you things will be OK, but when you start needing that reassurance several times a day it's time to take a step back.

3) Introduce an absolute ban on Googling symptoms

Dr Google is not, and never will be, your friend, especially not when you are a sufferer of health anxiety. Nor will message-boards and forums. Try to remember that people visit these places when they have reason to be concerned. Once you start understanding it's a skewed lens, you'll be better able to put things in perspective.

4) Try a countering technique

This is a CBT exercise which involves giving a persistent thought the courtroom treatment, by confronting it with a rational counter-statement. For example, if your persistent thought is something like "Everyone I love will die from this virus" you can counter it with factual statements such as "Actually, most people who get Covid-19 are likely to make a full recovery, and that's assuming mum, dad and my little sister will even catch it at all." As my mother always says: "just because you think something, doesn't make it true."

5) Do some exercise

Even if it's just star jumps in your bedroom or shaking your body parts like you're in the warm-up section of a hippie acting class, exercise will help get the adrenaline out of your system and channel the panic elsewhere.

6) Breathing and grounding exercises

From guided yogic breathing to using a strong smell (I favored lavender oil), grounding exercises can help bring you back to reality. I also found bending over to touch my toes and then very slowly standing up starting at the base of my spine to be beneficial, as it centers me. You can look for examples online, but sometimes, something as simple as sitting on the floor can help.

7) Allocate yourself a daily "worry period"

Give yourself half an hour to worry about this to your heart's content, and then you must go and do something else.

8) Treat yourself

Anything that will give you a little boost can help. It doesn't need to involve spending money: you can also cook yourself something nice, have a hot bath, or listen to a song you love.

9) Remember that your anxious state isn't permanent

When you are in it, anxiety always feels as though it will never end, but it will. It's hard to remember this but do try. I genuinely thought that I would never recover, and now even though we are in a public health crisis, I feel calm and have things in perspective. It's a worrying time, and many of us, myself included, will have loved ones who might be showing symptoms, but the tendency to jump to the worst-case scenario very rarely reflects reality. Be kind to yourself. It may be a bit cheesy, but this too shall pass.