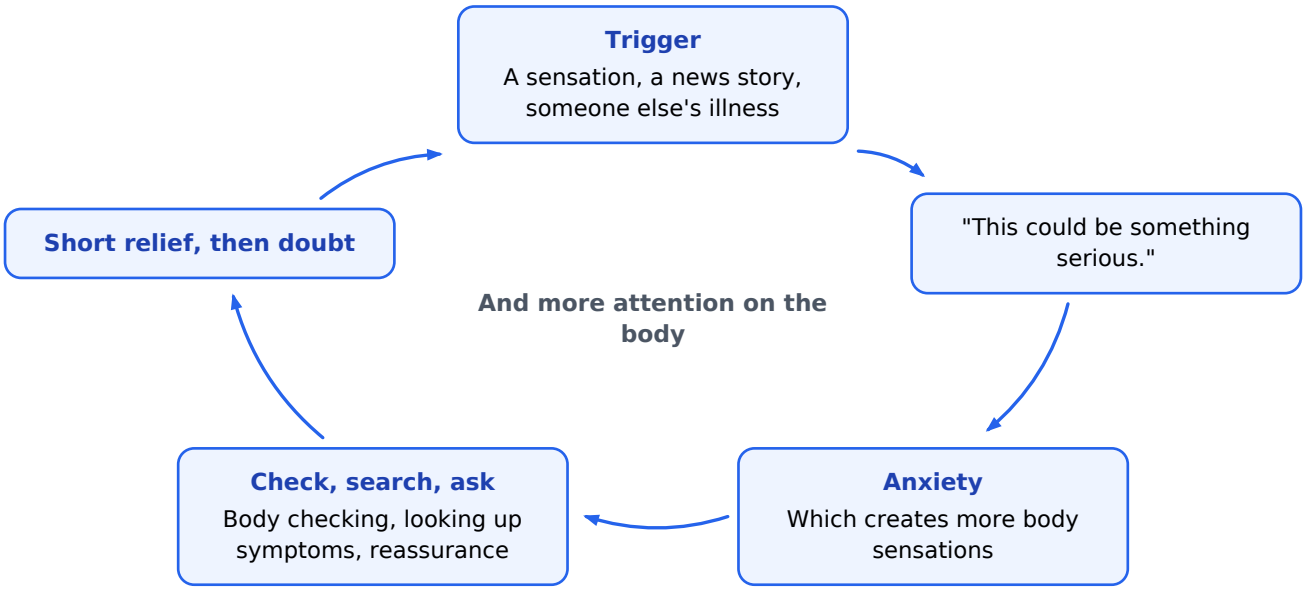
Understanding health anxiety

When worry about illness becomes the problem.

Everyone worries about their health sometimes. Health anxiety is when the worry is persistent, out of proportion to the medical findings, and takes over a lot of your time and peace of mind. The distress is completely real, whatever the cause of the symptoms.

How it works



Things worth knowing

- **Bodies are noisy.** Twinges, lumps, aches, flutters and odd sensations are part of normal life. Most have no medical meaning.
- **Attention amplifies.** Focus on any body part for a minute and you will find sensations there.
- **Anxiety has symptoms.** A racing heart, dizziness, tingling, stomach upset, tight chest and headaches are all caused by anxiety itself.
- **Checking causes symptoms.** Prodding a lump makes it sore. Repeated swallowing makes a throat feel tight.
- **Reassurance wears off.** A clear test brings relief for a while, then "what if they missed something?" arrives.

What treatment involves

1. Testing a different explanation: that the problem is worry about health, not health.
2. Cutting back on checking, searching and reassurance, step by step.
3. Learning to let body sensations and uncertainty be there without acting on them.
4. Getting back to the life that health worry has pushed aside.

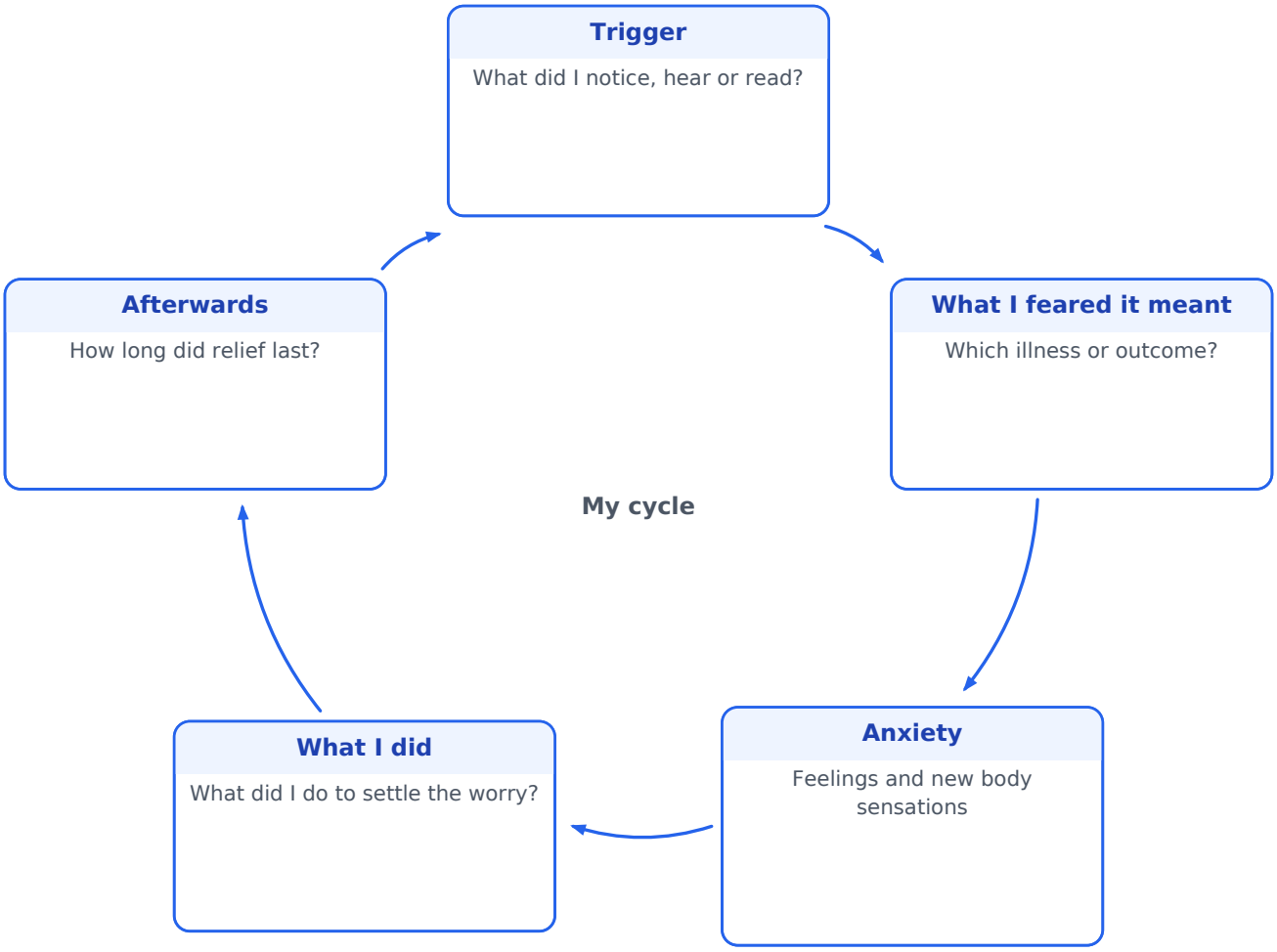
> **This is not about ignoring your health**
> Sensible medical care continues. We can agree a clear plan with your GP for when a symptom should be checked, so you do not have to decide in an anxious moment.

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My health anxiety cycle

Map a recent episode of health worry.

Name _____ Date _____



How did checking, searching or asking affect my worry over the following hours and days?

What is another possible explanation for what I noticed?

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The body focus experiment

A five-minute test of what attention does to sensation.

People with health worries often say, "But I really do feel it." They do. The question is whether paying attention changes what you feel. Try this.

1. Sit still. Close your eyes if you like.
2. Put all your attention on your left hand for two minutes. Search it for any sensation at all: warmth, pulsing, tingling, itching, heaviness.
3. Now open your eyes and count every blue object you can see for two minutes.
4. What happened to the sensations in your hand while you were counting?

What I noticed in my hand while I focused on it

What I noticed in my hand while I counted blue things

What this shows

Your hand did not change. What changed was where your attention was. Any part of the body will produce sensations if you search it, and those sensations fade into the background when attention moves on.

Which parts of my body do I scan or monitor most?

What might that be doing to what I feel there?

Try this

Next time you catch yourself scanning, name it ("I am scanning again") and move your attention to something outside your body.

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Checking and reassurance log

A daily count of checking, searching and asking for reassurance.

Name _____ Date _____

Each day, count roughly how many times you did each one. Rate your average health anxiety for the day from 0 to 10.

Day	Checked my body	Looked up symptoms	Asked for reassurance	Health anxiety (0 to 10)
Mon				
Tue				
Wed				
Thu				
Fri				
Sat				
Sun				

What do I notice? On the days I checked more, was I more anxious or less?

My target for next week (for example: check once in the morning only, no searching after 8pm)

What I will do when the urge comes

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Symptom searching: a cutting-back plan

A plan for cutting back on looking up symptoms online.

Name _____ Date _____

Searching online is designed to give answers, but for an anxious mind it does the opposite. Lists of possible causes always include something serious, frightening stories stick, and each search leads to another.

My searching at the moment

When and where I tend to search

What I am hoping to feel afterwards

How I actually feel afterwards

What it has cost me (time, sleep, peace of mind)

My plan

- [ ] Delay every urge to search by 20 minutes, then decide
- [ ] No searching in bed or after a set time in the evening
- [ ] No forums or personal stories
- [ ] One trusted source only (hse.ie), once, for no more than five minutes
- [ ] Tell someone my plan so they can back me up
- [ ] Remove health apps and bookmarks from my phone

Other rules

When the urge comes, I will say to myself

And I will do this instead

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Other explanations for a symptom

List every possible cause of a symptom, and give each one a fair share.

Name _____ Date _____

The symptom or sensation

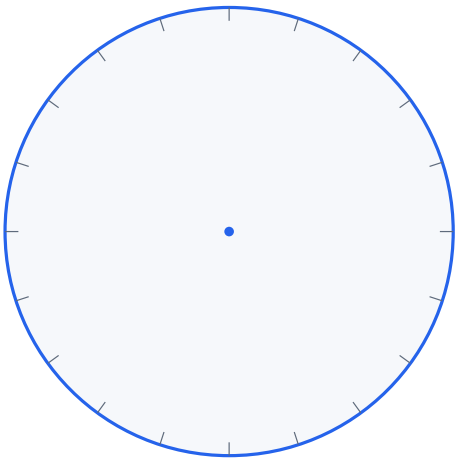
What I fear it means

How likely does that feel right now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Certain

List every other possible cause you can think of: tension, tiredness, too much coffee, a pulled muscle, anxiety itself, something you ate, checking the area, a virus, hormones. Then give each one a share of the pie. Put the feared illness in last.



Possible causes (feared illness last)	% share

How likely does the feared illness seem now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Certain

What do I notice?

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Theory A and Theory B

Compare two explanations of the problem: that it is danger, or that it is worry about danger.

Name _____ Date _____

Theory A says the problem is the danger itself. Theory B says the problem is the worry about the danger. Both cannot be acted on at once, because each asks you to do the opposite.

Theory A: the problem is...

The danger I fear, in one sentence

Theory B: the problem is...

The worry about that danger, in one sentence

Evidence that fits Theory A

Evidence that fits Theory B

If A is true, what do I need to do?

If B is true, what do I need to do?

Which theory have I been living by? What would it look like to act as if Theory B were true for the next two weeks?

Theory A and Theory B comes from the work of Paul Salkovskis and colleagues on OCD and health anxiety.

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Living with uncertainty about health

Why being sure about your health is not possible, and how to live with that.

Health anxiety makes a demand that cannot be met: "I need to be completely sure nothing is wrong." No doctor, scan or blood test can promise that. Everyone lives with some uncertainty about their health. Most of the time, most people do not think about it.

The problem

Trying to get certainty takes more and more time, and leaves less room for everything else. People can spend so much energy trying not to become ill that they stop living as if they were well.

A different approach

You do not have to believe you are healthy. You only have to be willing not to know for sure, and to put your attention back on your life.

When my mind says...	I can answer...
"What if it is something serious?"	"Maybe. I cannot know for certain, and neither can anyone. I have a plan with my GP."
"I need to check, just once."	"Checking gives me five minutes of relief and then more doubt. I will let the urge pass."
"What if the doctor missed something?"	"That is possible for everyone. I am choosing not to chase certainty today."
"I cannot relax until I know."	"I can do things that matter while not knowing."

What worry has pushed out

Things I have stopped doing or enjoying because of health worry

If I trusted my body a little more, what would I do this week?

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When to see the GP: an agreed plan

Agree in advance when a symptom should be checked, and when to wait.

Name _____ Date _____

Health anxiety can pull in two directions: going to the doctor again and again, or avoiding doctors altogether out of fear. A clear plan, ideally agreed with your GP, takes the decision out of the anxious moment.

> **Always**
> In an emergency, call 112 or 999. This plan is a guide for everyday worries and does not replace medical advice.

Routine care I will keep up (check-ups, screening, ongoing prescriptions)

A new symptom is worth a GP visit when... (for example: it lasts longer than a period we agree, or it is on a list my GP gives me)

Before booking, I will... (for example: wait the agreed time, note the symptom once a day without checking in between)

What I will ask the GP, and what I will not ask again once it is answered

After an appointment, I will not...

- [ ] Seek a second opinion on the same thing
- [ ] Search online
- [ ] Ask others to confirm

Who has agreed this plan with me, and the date

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