

Tackling Health Anxiety: A CBT Handbook

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Helen Tyrer

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For Paula and Rick

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Foreword

I am very pleased to recommend this book by Dr Tyrer to assist the training of a wide range of professionals working in healthcare. We think we know a great deal about illness in hospitals, but we tend to forget that a large part of it has a psychological component. What surprised me after reading this book was how common health anxiety is in medical clinics. If one in five people has the condition, it must lead to a great deal of suffering. I also note with some pleasure that the modification of cognitive-behavioural therapy developed by Dr Tyrer is especially suited to nurses working in general hospitals. Nurses are in a unique position here; they understand the medical problems of the people they are caring for and, after reading this book and receiving what I hope will be further training locally, they will then be able to understand the additional problems that are a direct consequence of health anxiety. Other professionals such as psychologists and psychiatrists may be equally competent in giving this treatment, but often will not give the same level of confidence that a well-trained nurse will give in administering this therapy.

I also like the balance of theory and practice in this book. We not only need to understand the principles behind treatment, but also have a good idea of what happens in practice. The case examples described by Dr Tyrer ring true and I am sure they will be of great value to practitioners when they are trying to disentangle psychological from physical problems in the patients that they see. I also hope that this book adds to the growing understanding that when patients present to any part of the National Health Service they should receive a full assessment of both their psychological and physical status; for rather too long, the psychological aspects have been ignored.

*Dr Peter Carter
Chief Executive and General Secretary
Royal College of Nursing*

Preface

I have written this book to help health professionals in their management of people who used to be diagnosed with hypochondria, but whom I think are better described as having health anxiety. I work mainly in general hospital settings and we now know that somewhere between 10 and 20% of all patients attending clinics in general hospitals have pathological health anxiety. It is pathological because it creates enormous suffering and disability and this often goes on for years in the absence of treatment. At present it is unfortunate that most of these people continue to attend clinics in search of a treatment not for their anxiety, but for the disease or diseases that they suspect they might have.

Although there are psychological services for people with health anxiety, only a small proportion of those with the condition are ever seen. This is partly because it is so common, partly because many people feel stigmatised by the suggestion that they might need psychological input for what they suspect is a physical condition, and partly because those who already have a physical disorder but also have abnormal health anxiety are not normally seen by the psychology services. I believe fervently that the best way of managing health anxiety successfully and economically is for front-line staff in medical services to both recognise and treat these patients in the clinics where they present repeatedly. They should be treated by staff who are part of the general services, not referred to a specialised clinic. So general and specialised nurses of all grades, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, dietitians, and support staff with relatively little in the way of formal qualifications, as well as psychologists, can all become competent in both identifying people with health anxiety and giving them advice and treatment. This is not a belief; it has recently been reinforced by evidence from a large randomised trial (Tyrer *et al*, 2013).

What I hope is that the necessary advice and treatment is given in this book. It is all based on my practice over the past 12 years and work in developing this treatment, and I am indebted to Professor Paul Salkovskis in first showing me the essentials of this important modification of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) that lie at the heart of management.

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In my work I have been helped greatly by my patients in developing this treatment further in all branches of medicine. I have therefore concentrated on giving practical examples of treatment, including case examples, all of which are fictitious in that they do not identify people, but accurate in that they describe problems that have arisen in therapy and how they can be overcome.

We are a long way off from what I would like to see as the comprehensive assessment of all patients when they first present at hospital clinics, when the accuracy and expertise of the medical assessment is matched equally by the quality and sophistication of the psychological one, but I hope that the proper assessment of health anxiety can be incorporated into this ideal scenario soon. This book is a start.

I thank John Rowley and Nick Wight especially for their encouragement in allowing me to develop this work, Elizabeth Carlin and the staff of the genitourinary medicine department at Kings Mill Hospital for starting me off on this journey, and my husband, Peter, for his constant support.

H.T.