



WORRIED SICK

There's a type of anxiety many people don't know about—but should. Naming it is the first step to healing from it.

BY CHRISTINA CRAWFORD

DISEASE IS ONE of the things in life over which we have only limited control. Even if you do everything “right,” you can still end up with a deadly malady. For me, this lack of control creates extreme fear.

Whenever I notice a new physical sensation—like a feeling of fatigue or a bloated belly—I assume the worst-case scenario (usually cancer). Hearing about someone else with a terminal disease is enough to make me spiral. It's an arduous way to live, thinking you're about to die all the time. There are days when my worries are so distracting, I'm unable to work or even parent my kids effectively.

I struggle with what psychiatrists call illness anxiety disorder (IAD), or, in layman's terms, hypochondria. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of*

Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, an IAD diagnosis may be confirmed when a person's preoccupation with becoming ill persists for more than six months—and even after a thorough medical evaluation.

Some IAD patients (me included) are also diagnosed with somatic symptom disorder (SSD). This condition involves “excessive and disproportionate thoughts and feelings” about a physical symptom (or set of symptoms), says Jeffrey P. Staab, MD, MS, professor and chair of the department of psychiatry and psychology at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

“Those suffering [from these disorders] experience health anxiety to the degree that it can be disruptive, and diminishes their quality of life,” says Dr. Staab. “These

individuals are often highly tuned in to bodily sensations, easily alarmed, and catastrophic in their thinking.”

The Cycle

I wasn't always so anxious. In my 20s, I felt invincible. I used to ski at high speeds without a helmet and eat gas station sushi without hesitation. But after I had my first baby, at 29, a seismic shift occurred. I became overwhelmed by the possibility that my children (I now have three) could lose their mom.

My husband is a physician, so he's a perfect target for me to badger with my health concerns. I can always tell when he's grown weary of my antics, though. Then I have no choice but to turn to Doctor Google. I can waste hours chasing threads of information through the Internet.

Patients with IAD or SSD tend to take one of two approaches to their health care, Dr. Staab explains. Some avoid doctors, because they're afraid of what they might learn. But more commonly, people with these conditions seek frequent medical appointments, in search of reassurance that their symptoms do not mean what they fear. “They see doctor after doctor, and often shop around for physicians,” says Dr. Staab.

I'm in the latter group. I spend an exorbitant amount of money on visits to specialists and medical testing in an unrelenting search for explanations. A normal scan or blood test will provide me some comfort. But as soon as a new symptom appears, my anxiety flares again.

Reality Check

It is possible to disrupt the cycle with treatment, says Dr. Staab. “Reducing a patient's burden is what we're after.”

Talk therapy—especially cognitive behavior therapy (CBT)—can help you learn healthier ways to cope with your worries. In CBT, you might work on changing how you react to new physical sensations, for example. Or you might try to break a habit of frequently scanning your body for potential symptoms. Your doctor might also recommend medication for anxiety, such as an antidepressant.

In many cases, anxiety may be exacerbating or even causing a patient's troubling physical sensations, says Dr. Staab. (Heart palpitations, digestive distress, headaches, muscle twitching—these issues and more have been linked to stress.) So alleviating



5 Minute Reset

Hover your phone's camera over the smart code to follow a short, calming meditation on Health.com. Repeat as needed.

your anxiety might actually alleviate your symptoms, too.

With the help of a therapist, I have developed a management strategy that works for me. When I feel myself slipping into a negative spiral, I pause to recognize what's happening. Then I remind myself I have a choice: I can waste time and energy fretting (which will have zero effect on the ultimate outcome). Or I can carry on with my day.

Here is an indelible truth that I find to be both cruel and liberating: Our bodies are only temporary vessels. Ultimately, we will all face the same fate.

When I fixate on the end of my life, I miss out on much of the magnificence of the present. So I choose to redirect my thoughts, back to the here and now. 🍀

Stop a Fear Spiral

Many of us are more worried about our health these days (thank you, global pandemic). When your mind starts to spin, try one of these soothing techniques from Rebecca Harvey, PsyD, founder of Total Wellness Consultants in Dallas.

Get rooted.

Slow your breathing. Inhale all the way into your belly, press your feet into the floor, and imagine gravity is helping you feel grounded or weighted. This helps generate a sense of security in the moment.

Visualize calm.

Close your eyes. Imagine yourself in a safe,

peaceful place. What do you see, smell, and hear? Then recite a soothing mantra, like “I've experienced this worried state before—it will pass.”

Focus your mind.

Direct your attention to your breath. If your thoughts wander, return to your breath. “The beauty of mindfulness is that over time, you train your brain,

and the skill becomes easier,” says Harvey. Eventually, you'll learn to place your attention where you choose. And when you choose to focus on positive things, your thoughts trigger the release of neurochemicals that lead to more positive feelings.