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Health Anxiety and Other Psychological Responses to Bodily Symptoms

Chapter Summary

According to the common-sense model of illness representations, after perceiving physical sensations we form a common-sense representation of these sensations to determine their meaning. The representations include beliefs about the identity, cause, consequences, timeline, controllability, and emotional impact of the physical sensations. The mental representations we form influence how we cope with the physical sensations. The way we view our physical sensations influences our emotions and health outcomes, and our emotions and health outcomes influence our representations of the physical sensations. When physical sensations are perceived to be extremely threatening, people may experience health anxiety.

The cognitive behavioural model of health anxiety suggests that health anxiety results when individuals develop dysfunctional cognitions based on past experience. These cognitions result in the individual being preoccupied with his/her health and misinterpreting innocuous or benign bodily sensations to be more threatening than they actually are. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has emerged as the treatment of choice for health anxiety. Key strategies include identifying and challenging dysfunctional thoughts and exposing individuals to feared stimuli while simultaneously modifying or eliminating safety behaviours. Randomized controlled trials comparing CBT to usual care suggest CBT not only reduces health anxiety but also associated problems such as generalized anxiety, depression, social function, and use of medical services.

Essay Topics

1. What is the common-sense model of illness representation? (pp. 143–144)
2. What is the cognitive behavioural model of health anxiety? (pp. 152–154)

3. Given what we know about anxiety disorders in general and health anxiety specifically, what are some things you would recommend to a friend who is overly concerned about his or her physical health and appears to be showing symptoms of health anxiety? (p. 158)

Weblinks

<http://star-society.org>

The Stress and Anxiety Research Society (STAR) is an organization of researchers who publish the journal *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*. Their website provides access to journals, newsletters, and other stress research websites.

http://www.cpa.ca/docs/File/Publications/FactSheets/PsychologyWorksFactSheet_HealthAnxiety.pdf

“*Psychology Works*” *Fact Sheet: Health Anxiety*, published by the Canadian Psychological Association.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fighting-fear/201305/the-treatment-health-anxiety>

An insightful article on the *Psychology Today* website about treating health anxiety.

<https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk>

The “Health Anxiety” page of the Anxiety UK website features a detailed discussion of health anxiety, including symptoms and triggers.

Glossary

Cause (as related to illness representation) Beliefs about what caused one’s illness.

Confirmatory bias When individuals with anxiety tend to focus on information that confirms their fears and ignore information that disconfirms their fears.

Consequences (as related to illness representation) Beliefs about how illness impacts one’s everyday life (e.g., self-care, household responsibilities, family, work).

Controllability (as related to illness representation) Beliefs about whether we have control over our illness and how efficacious treatment will be.

Health anxiety The experience of becoming overwhelmed and anxious about one’s present or future health.

Hypochondriasis Extreme health anxiety based on misinterpretation of bodily symptoms that persists despite medical reassurance, and results in significant distress and/or disability for at least six months. Now known as *somatic symptom disorder* or *illness anxiety disorder*.

Neuroticism A tendency to experience negative emotions and emotional instability; also referred to as negative affectivity or trait anxiety.

Safety behaviours Behaviours that anxious individuals engage in because they believe they will keep them safe, such as information-seeking, reassurance-seeking, body-checking, and cleaning, but that, in fact, serve to increase anxiety.

Timeline (as related to illness representation) Beliefs about how long an illness will last and whether the illness will fluctuate or persist over time.