

OVERCOMING HEALTH ANXIETY

Letting Go of Your Fear of Illness

KATHERINE M.B. OWENS, PHD & MARTIN M. ANTONY, PHD

About the Authors

Katherine M. B. Owens, PhD, is adjunct professor at the University of Regina and a clinical lecturer at the University of Saskatchewan. Clinically, Owens serves as a senior psychologist in the Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region Mental Health Clinic and as a therapist in private practice, she specializes in anxiety disorders, depression, and neuropsychological assessment.

Martin M. Antony, PhD, is professor and chair of the Department of Psychology at Ryerson University. He is also director of research at the Anxiety Treatment and Research Centre at St. Joseph's Healthcare, and past-president of the Canadian Psychological Association. An award-winning researcher, Antony is coauthor of *The Anti-Anxiety Workbook*, *When Perfect Isn't Good Enough*, and more than twenty-five other books. His research, writing, and clinical practice focus on cognitive behavioral therapy and the treatment of anxiety disorders. He has been widely quoted in the American and Canadian media.

Health anxiety causes no end of worry and turmoil for sufferers and the medical professionals and family members who care for them.

Affecting up to 15 million Americans, these fears cost the United States health care system 20 to 30 billion dollars

per year in unnecessary treatments, appointments, and tests. What's more, health anxiety places a serious psychological and financial burden on the sufferers themselves, who exhibit symptoms such as bodily checking, anxiety about bacteria, selective attention to physical sensations, preoccupation with wellness, excessive use of vitamins, and over-exercising—symptoms that actually put these individuals at increased risk of illness.

Most individuals with health anxiety feel misunderstood and have been repeatedly told by impatient friends, family members, and medical professionals to simply "get over it," with no guidance on how to do so. Some have legitimate concerns about their health, but have become overwhelmed by their diagnoses and are unable to enjoy life without dwelling on the health challenges they face. *Overcoming Health Anxiety* presents a compassionate cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) approach to identifying and challenging the illness-related thoughts that dominate the lives of those with health anxiety. CBT is proven effective for the treatment of anxiety and can drastically reduce health anxiety symptoms in a matter of weeks. The book starts by increasing readers' motivation for change and gradually helps them come to terms with feelings of uncertainty and fear, rebuild relationships with their medical professionals, and fearlessly enjoy happy, healthy lifestyles.

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July 2011 / 978-1-57224-838-0 / \$16.95 / 6 x 9 / 176 pages



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Health-conscious or hypochondriac?

We hear it all the time: "Eat *this*, not that," "use *this* product, avoid that one." "Do this daily, but by all means don't *ever* do that!"

These days cautionary health tales are cropping up everywhere we turn, striking fear within us that our bodies may turn on us at any given moment. For some, these fears are moderators that help us to develop healthy lifestyles. But for up to 15 million Americans suffering with hypochondriasis, the preoccupation with fear of having or contracting a serious disease can be debilitating, expensive, and self-destructive.

Health anxiety causes unrelenting worry and turmoil for sufferers and the medical professionals and family members who care for them. These fears cost the United States health care system 20 to 30 billion dollars per year in unnecessary treatments, appointments, and tests.

According to Drs. Katherine Owens and Martin Antony, authors of *Overcoming Health Anxiety*, many individuals with health anxiety feel misunderstood and have been repeatedly told by impatient friends, family members, and medical professionals to simply, "get over it," with no guidance on how to do so. Some have legitimate concerns about their health, but have become overwhelmed by their diagnoses and are unable to enjoy life without dwelling on the health challenges they face. *Overcoming Health Anxiety* presents a compassionate cognitive behavioral therapy approach to identifying and challenging the illness-related thoughts that dominate the lives of those with health anxiety.

Excerpt

What is health anxiety?

Excerpted from *Overcoming Health Anxiety*

If you suffer from health anxiety you may experience some of the following:

- Fleeting worries about numerous feelings and sensations (for example, headache, stomach upset, itching, dizziness). These may change from day to day depending on what seems most immediate or important.
- Significant and lasting distress about a few specific feelings and sensations (for example, if your father suffered a serious heart attack at your age, cardiac symptoms might be the only ones that worry you).
- Extreme worry about the possibility of contracting a specific disease (such as cancer, HIV, or multiple sclerosis). This concern might persist or creep back after you have undergone tests and been reasonably reassured by your doctor.
- Fear of public places or situations where you might be exposed to disease or germs (for example, a full airplane, a hospital, or a funeral) because of the anxiety that they could make you seriously ill.
- Anxiety sometimes so strong that you may begin to act in ways that, logically, you know don't make sense. Examples might include avoiding television shows about illness or avoiding reading the obituaries. While on the one hand, it seems obvious that you can't become sick from reading an obituary, on the other hand, doing so can provoke anxiety and discomfort.

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