

Unexplained physical problems¹

Unexplained physical problems can be helped

An important message

You have been worried about your health because of symptoms that you have been experiencing for which no physical cause has been found. First, it is important for you to know that this does not mean people do not believe you or think that you are not really experiencing these symptoms. *You know* that you are not imagining your symptoms. You need to know that the people who are trying to help you understand that too.

Your symptoms are not 'all in your mind'. In fact, we know that it is misleading to think of symptoms as being *either* physical *or* emotional. Our minds and bodies are intimately connected. For example, living with physical ill health and pain can lead to depression or anxiety. Conversely, depression and anxiety or living with prolonged stress makes us more vulnerable to physical ill health. Stress and tension lead to bodily symptoms. It is even possible for someone to become depressed because of physical illness, and for the depression to go on causing bodily symptoms even after the original physical problem has got better.

You can rely on your doctor to make sure that you are not suffering from any serious medical illness. That is his or her, job. It is more helpful for you to focus your efforts on reducing the symptoms, so that they interfere less with your life, than on trying to work out what caused them in the first place. Whatever has caused the symptoms, certain ways of coping with them are likely to mean that they bother you less and that you enjoy life more. This leaflet aims to help you learn those superior methods of coping. You may find some ideas more helpful than others.

How our emotions, worries and problems can make bodily symptoms more troublesome

First, worry and tension can cause you to tighten up your muscles. When this lasts for some time these muscles can become painful. For example, when this happens to the muscles at the back of the neck it leads to a headache. When muscles around the bowel contract it leads to stomach pains.

Second, when you get tense and anxious this causes a substance called adrenaline to be released into your body. This can be very helpful in making you more alert and prepared to deal with problems. At the same time, this substance can cause many unpleasant physical symptoms in all parts of your body, such as pounding heart, chest pains, etc.

Third, breathing too quickly or deeply (also known as hyperventilation) decreases levels of carbon dioxide and the acid content of the blood. This leads to less oxygen getting to your brain and your body, which in turn leads to physical symptoms of anxiety. Symptoms include dizziness, light-headedness, breathlessness, feelings of being smothered, feelings of unreality, pounding heart, tingling sensation and so on.

Fourth, if you are feeling down or fed up with things you are much more likely to focus on your bodily sensations and worry about them than when you are feeling cheerful.

Fifth, physical symptoms tend to have a pattern. They may come at times when you are under stress or at times when you do not have enough to distract you. Try to keep a diary sheet, to work out when your symptoms occur. Write these things in your diary for each day of the week: what your symptoms were, how severe they were (you can rate them from 1 to 10), and what you were doing and how you were feeling.

Finally, we concentrate on some symptoms more than others. If a member of your family or a close friend has had a life-threatening illness that began with the symptoms that you are experiencing now, you will tend to worry more about this and think about it more than you might have done for some other symptom.

Coping with unexplained physical problems

Remember, you need support from your family and/or friends

1. Record your symptoms

If you want to see the link between your feelings, day-to-day problems and your physical symptoms, try keeping a diary sheet for each day over the next week:

- Write down each physical symptom that you have.
- Write how severe each symptom is between 0 and 10 (0: not severe, 10: very severe).
- Write what you were doing and how you were feeling when you had your symptoms.

Diary sheet				
Week_____	Symptom	Severity	What I was doing?	How I was feeling?
eg	Stomach pain	4	Meeting a deadline	Low mood
eg	Back pain	7	Spring cleaning	Tired
eg	Headache	10	Preparing dinner party	Anxious
Monday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Tuesday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Wednesday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Thursday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Friday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Saturday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Sunday	_____	_____	_____	_____

Keep this record for two weeks, then look for patterns. Discuss the results with a trusted friend or your health worker.

2. Check your alcohol intake

Some people use alcohol to cope with pain or stress; however, many people find that alcohol can make physical symptoms worse and in the long run can make the existing problem worse. Guidelines for what is 'low-risk' drinking are presented below. Individuals will differ in terms of what level will cause harm.

→ For men:

Up to three units of alcohol a day, no alcoholic drinking for two days a week, a maximum of 15 units of alcohol per week

→ For women:

Up to two units of alcohol a day, no alcoholic drinking for two days a week, a maximum of 10 units of alcohol per week

As a rough guide, there is one unit of alcohol in:

- half a pint of ordinary strength (3.5 or 4% ABV) beer, lager or cider
- a small glass (125ml) of lower strength wine (8 or 9% ABV)
- a single 25 ml pub measure of spirits (40% ABV).

In a typical day, how many units of alcohol do you have?

On how many days in a typical week do you drink?

Is this above the safe limits for your gender?

If you would like help to reduce your drinking, ask your health worker for more information.

3. Learn slow breathing

Slow breathing will help to reduce common physical symptoms such as muscle tension, hot and cold flushes, headaches, and chest tightness. When you get certain physical symptoms, for example breathlessness, it feels like you are not breathing enough. The natural response is to breathe in more; however, if you do try to get more air in by breathing in more, this will make the problem worse. The best solution is to slow down your breathing *even* though you may feel that you should speed it up. Now we will show you a slow breathing technique that can help to reduce many different physical symptoms. Remember to breathe in using your abdomen (not your chest) and through your nose.

- ➔ Breathe in slowly to the count of three seconds.
- ➔ When you get to three, slowly breathe out to the count of three, pause for three seconds before breathing in again
- ➔ After five minutes or so, say the word 'relax' to yourself as you breathe out
 - practise twice a day for 10 minutes (five minutes is better than nothing)
 - regularly check and slow down your breathing during the day
 - use slow breathing whenever you get tense and worried about your symptoms
 - use this technique before and during situations that make your symptoms worse.

4. Identify and deal with problems in your life

We all experience problems in life and sometimes these can trigger physical symptoms. Was there anything that bothered you before your symptoms began or anything that bothers you now? If so, please write them down. Now, pick out one or two problems that seem really important and make a decision to resolve them. You may like to ask a friend to help you. Sit down with a problem-solving sheet (your health worker can provide you with one) and go through the following steps:

1. Say exactly what the problem (or goal) is.
2. List five or six possible solutions to the problem — write down any ideas that occur to you, not merely the 'good' ideas.
3. Evaluate the good and bad points of each idea in turn.
4. Choose the solution that best fits your needs.
5. Plan exactly the steps you will take to put the solution into action.
6. Review your efforts after attempting to carry out the plan. Praise all efforts. If unsuccessful, start again.

Your health worker can give you more information about problem solving techniques.

5. Plan to increase your level of activity

When you are not getting very much exercise, you can start to feel weaker and notice even more symptoms. This is because when we do not exercise our muscles begin to waste away and we feel less fit.

Set goals for gradually increasing your level of activity over the next four weeks.

If you are over 65 or have signs of heart disease, you should consult your doctor before starting an exercise routine. Remember to build up your level of activity gradually.

My goals are:

Week 1.....
.....
Week 2.....
.....
Week 3.....
.....
Week 4.....
.....

6. Identify negative thinking and attitudes

When people start to feel unwell, they often tend to think negatively about their symptoms. Negative thinking can also trigger depression and can slow down recovery. There are differences in the way people think. *Some* people think mostly positively while others are more negative. Can you relate to the examples below?

You have had investigations and the tests are negative:

Person A

I can't understand why
I must have something really serious
They will never find it

Person B

OK, I still have the pain
At least I don't have(the illness investigated)
If I worry about it I will feel worse

Increased pain

Pain is easier to bear

If you tend to think or react like person A, it is likely that you have a negative way of thinking. Here are some more examples of other negative thoughts or beliefs.

Mark the statements that apply to you.

- Pain is always a sign of really serious illness
- Physical symptoms are always a sign that there is something wrong with your body
- It is impossible to know with absolute certainty that I am not ill
- If I do not feel well I have to find out exactly what is wrong
- Doctors never tell you the truth
- You can't trust anyone to get it right when you are sick

7. Work on making your thinking more balanced

It is likely that you have been thinking in a negative way for some time. If so, it will take time and a lot of practice to change these ways of thinking.

Here are some tips:

First, ask yourself is this belief that I have true?

- Consult someone outside the situation for his or her opinion.
- Ask yourself if everyone would have the same belief in this situation.
- Examine other possible explanations for the event occurring.

Second, counter each negative/unreasonable thought with more realistic ones.

- These should be different to the unreasonable belief.
- Try and come up with realistic statements.
- Try and think of as many counters as possible.

The following example shows how different thoughts can lead to different reactions to the same situation.

Situation: Developed a new rash on leg, which doctor said I should not worry about

Unreasonable/negative thoughts:

- My sister had a rash like that and she developed arthritis.
- My doctor is not telling me the truth.
- I should see a specialist.
- This could spread much further.

Resulting feelings: Worry and more physical symptoms brought on by anxiety

Reasonable/positive thoughts:

- My doctor says there is nothing wrong but he will continue to monitor it.
- There is no reason why he should not tell me the truth.
- Many people get rashes and don't develop arthritis.
- There is nothing else I can do about it just now.
- Apart from this I feel well.

Resulting feelings: Acceptance; able to stop worrying

Now you can work through your own examples. Write down situations that have made you unhappy, any negative thoughts that you may have had and the resulting feelings. Next, opposite each negative thought, write down a more balanced thought and any new feelings. You can do this with the help of your friend, doctor and/or your counsellor. You will find that after practising this technique for a while, you get much better at balancing your thoughts.

Remember it will take time to change the way you think and feel.

8. Deal with any emotional problems you may also have

Emotional problems, such as depression and/or anxiety, may be playing a part in how badly you have been feeling. Depression and anxiety can cause physical symptoms. Moreover, ***people who have physical symptoms can get depressed and anxious about them.***

What is depression?

Many people use the word 'depression' to describe feelings of sadness or loss. These feelings often pass within a few hours or a few days. During this time, people are able to carry on much as usual. The illness that your doctor calls depression is different from this. You feel sad much more intensely and for longer. It is common to lose interest in things that you used to enjoy. Depression commonly interferes with your work, social and family life. It can get so bad that the person suffering may think of suicide. Depression can also affect people in many other ways:

- disturbed sleep
- feelings of guilt
- changes to appetite
- physical aches and pains
- lack of energy and motivation.

What is anxiety?

The word 'anxiety' is used to describe the mental and physical response to feared or threatening situations. This reaction may include trembling, feelings of choking, increased heart beat, sweating, feelings of unreality, and so on. Anxiety is a normal response experienced by everyone at times. Nearly being hit by a car, sitting for an exam or giving a public talk are all examples of situations in which most people will experience anxiety. However, anxiety becomes a problem when it starts to interfere with your life in an ongoing and persistent way. You are likely to be suffering from an anxiety disorder if you have any of the following:

- the anxiety reaction occurs frequently
- it interferes with your work, family and social life
- your fears are out of proportion to the situation
- you start to avoid places or situations where you experience anxiety.

If you have symptoms of depression and anxiety in addition to the physical symptoms that worry you, discuss these with your doctor. Your doctor or other health worker can give you information about available treatments and also about what you yourself can do to deal with these problems.

9. Keep a record of progress

Start off by writing down exactly what your main symptoms are at this moment. This will help you to begin to monitor your progress. Mark on the lines how severe the symptoms actually are. Also give yourself an overall rating of how you feel *from* 0–10 (0: not at all severe, 10: very severe). Keep a record of the scores and see how they change over the weeks.

Example of symptom record form

Date: _____					
1) Symptom: Disturbed sleep					
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not at all severe	<input type="checkbox"/>
2) Symptom: Lack of energy					
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not at all severe	<input type="checkbox"/>

Symptom record form

Date _____					
1) Symptom: _____					
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not at all severe	<input type="checkbox"/>
2) Symptom: _____					
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not at all severe	<input type="checkbox"/>
3) Symptom: _____					
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not at all severe	<input type="checkbox"/>

Symptom record form

Date _____					
1) Symptom: _____					
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not at all severe	<input type="checkbox"/>
2) Symptom: _____					
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not at all severe	<input type="checkbox"/>
3) Symptom: _____					
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not at all severe	<input type="checkbox"/>

ⁱ The leaflet has been adapted with permission from World Health Organization. *Mental Disorders in Primary Care: a WHO Educational Package*, 1998.