



Did you know that... Psychology works for Intense Illness Concern (Hypochondriasis)

What is Intense Illness Concern (hypochondriasis)?

Intense Illness Concern is the fear of having or getting a serious disease such as cancer, heart disease or multiple sclerosis. The fear persists despite reassurance to the contrary from physicians. Illness **fears can be triggered** by bothersome physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach problems. In addition, **fears can be made worse** by stories about illness either in the media or from friends and family.

Some people fear one specific illness while others fear many different illnesses. Because of their illness fears, some individuals go to the doctor frequently, see many specialists, and have extensive medical tests. Others avoid going to the doctor because of their illness fears. Many people who worry about their health find that they check their bodies routinely for signs of disease and often ask others for reassurance that they are healthy.

The term **hypochondriasis** is a medical term that is sometimes misunderstood and has negative connotations. However, when used properly, it means the same thing as Intense Illness Concern.

How prevalent is Intense Illness Concern?

About 3% to 5% of the Canadian population suffers from intense illness concern. Up to 20% of the population experience intermittent or milder fears about disease. **This is a relatively common problem** and one that can cause significant interference in an individual's life. It can also be costly to the health care system when it results in high levels of medical services utilization.

What are the main causes of Intense Illness Concern?

To date, little is known about the causes of illness fears. Individuals who are anxious may be more likely to also have fears about disease. It may also be related to stressful experiences with illness and death in childhood or adulthood.

What psychological treatments are effective?

The primary psychological treatment that has been shown to be effective in helping people with intense illness concern is **cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)**. This treatment involves:

- decreasing specific behaviours such as checking one's body for symptoms and asking others for reassurance about one's health;
- learning how to counter the excessive worries about health and illness;
- direct exposure to the illness worries, which reduces the fear associated with them

- overcoming avoidance of situations related to illness and death;
- coping with fear of death by emphasizing the importance of accepting the reality of death and enjoying life to the fullest; and
- general anxiety management strategies such as relaxation techniques and increasing exercise.

How effective are psychological methods of treating Intense Illness Concern?

Research demonstrates that **cognitive-behavioural treatment is helpful** in reducing fears about having and/or getting a serious illness. Studies show that individuals receiving from 6 to 20 sessions of CBT generally report decreased illness fear and a reduction in accompanying depression. Both individual and group CBT are effective. More evaluation of this treatment for intense illness concern is needed and is presently ongoing in a number of centres around the world.

Resources

- Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada
<http://www.anxietycanada.ca/English.htm>
- Anxiety Disorders Association of British Columbia <http://www.anxietybc.com/>

Consultation with or referral to a registered psychologist can help guide you as to the use of these therapies. For a list of psychologists in your area, <http://www.cpa.ca/Psychologist/>.

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