

Cyberchondriasis

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Abstract

Cyberchondriasis is the excessive preoccupation with one's health, often caused by erroneous internet information obtained after several hours of searching vast number of websites every day. On experiencing hypochondriasis it helpful to question ones 'own beliefs, talking about the fears and concerns, not to shame oneself, meditating and deep breathing. The management includes psychiatric consultation and cognitive behavioral therapy.

Keywords: Cyberchondriasis; Hypochondriasis; Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

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Introduction

Cyberchondriasis is the excessive preoccupation with one's health, often caused by erroneous internet information obtained after several hours of searching vast number of websites every day. Cyberchondria is also described as one when the patient believes that he has or could have rare disorders like brain tumor, cancer, etc. with some symptoms that are found in those conditions experienced by the patient unconnected with risk factors, prevalence and incidence of disease or symptoms. For making it clear let me quote an example: if a person searches for information related to headaches, comes across information

about brain tumors or stroke, this might create further uncertainty and fear which may in turn precipitate to search more. This way, the person may feel compelled to search for brain tumor in an effect to reassure themselves that a brain tumor is unlikely.

Cyberchondriacs are ambivalent about finding out that they have an illness. On one hand, they are terribly fearful of being sick and dying, and the other keep on looking for something to validate symptoms to get attention and sympathy. They keep on surfing and researching even if search results show that are alright and don't have serious health problem.¹

Background

The first systematic large-scale study of Cyberchondria was reported by R. White and E. Horvitz which included several phases of analysis. They defined Cyberchondria as the "unfounded escalation of concerns about common symptomatology, based on the review of search results and literature on the web." They conducted a survey of 500 people who confirmed the prevalence of web-induced medical anxieties. They analyzed anonymous large-scale queries in all of the popular

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search engines and noted the commonality of escalations of queries from common complaints to queries on concerning diseases. They also found that potentially disruptive querying about disorders could continue in other sessions over days, weeks, and months, and that the queries could disrupt non-medical search activities.²

K Muse *et al.* examined the relationship between health anxiety and searching for health information online. The majority of those with 'high' ($n = 46$) and 'low' ($n = 36$) levels of health anxiety reported seeking health information online. However, those with higher levels of health anxiety sought online health information more frequently, spent longer searching, and found searching more distressing and anxiety provoking. This preliminary data suggested that searching for health information online may exacerbate health anxiety.³

What to do when you get a cyberchondria attack?

1. *Don't shame yourself:* Maybe you are really in stress and not pretending. Your fears come from somewhere sometimes too deep and too old to recognize. The best way to get out of shame is to speak to a trusted friend or someone who has a similar tendency to worry who have understood you.
2. *Question your beliefs:* It involves questioning the belief stressing you out, turning it around and giving evidence for why it is not true.
3. *Drop into your body:* Do meditation. Breathe deeply and feel your emotion.
4. *Talk about your fears with your primary care doctor:* Telling your doctor about your tendency to worry and making sure you get in touch with them can help alleviate fears and jumping to conclusions.
5. *Remember it's not all you:* The environment we live in and the online mis-information is designed to scare us.

After the fact, reexamine the situation and see

what triggered your fear. Sometimes the anxiety is unrelated to the health and can be work related.⁴

Management

If health anxiety is causing an impact on person's life, it may be beneficial to seek help from psychiatrist. With professional help, people will be able to identify the factors responsible for Cyberchondria and try to manage them. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is often effective in the treatment of anxiety, CBT focuses on irrational and distorted beliefs and helps the person to change their beliefs.⁵

Conclusion

The wealth of medical information on the Web makes it convenient for non-experts to conduct their own diagnosis and healthcare assessment based on limited knowledge of signs, symptoms, and disorders. The management includes psychiatric consultation and CBT.

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