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ILLNESS ANXIETY DISORDER

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ABSTRACT

Definition: Illness anxiety disorder involves an overwhelming and ongoing concern about having or developing a serious medical condition. **Types:** There are two types of IAD, Care seeking and Care-avoidant. **Causes:** Biological, psychological, environmental factors are involved. **Symptoms:** Preoccupied with thoughts of having major illness, Depression, cognitive abnormalities. **Treatment:** Treatment of illness anxiety disorder may include cognitive behavioral therapy and medication.

Key words: Illness Anxiety disorder, IAD, Hypochondriasis, Cognitive Behavioral therapy

INTRODUCTION

Illness Anxiety Disorder (IAD), previously known as Hypochondriasis, refers to a condition characterized by an excessive and unwarranted preoccupation with the fear of having a serious medical illness. A person diagnosed with Illness Anxiety Disorder is referred to as a hypochondriac. They tend to overreact to any physical or psychological symptoms they notice, even if the symptoms are minor, and strongly believe they either have or are on the verge of being diagnosed with a severe illness. Though not officially recognized as a medical term, “doctor shopping” is commonly applied to describe the actions of individuals with this disorder who frequently seek multiple medical consultations and diagnostic tests. Despite receiving negative results, they often remain dissatisfied with the evaluations provided. Even reading about a disease or hearing that someone they know has been diagnosed with an illness precipitates alarm on their part. It is estimated to affect between 2.1% and 13.1% of general adult population.

Definition:

Illness Anxiety Disorder is defined as an unrealistic or inaccurate interpretation of physical symptoms or sensations, leading to preoccupation and fear of having a serious disease.

Types:

- *Care seeking:* Frequent visits to healthcare facilities, seeking opinions from multiple specialists, and undergoing repeated medical tests.
- *Care-avoidant:* Avoidance of healthcare providers and medical care, often due to distrust or fear that symptoms will not be taken seriously, leading to increased anxiety.

Causes:

The development of Illness anxiety disorder is multifaceted and stems from interplay of biological, psychological, and environmental influences. Contributing factors include genetic predisposition through a family history of anxiety disorders, previous experiences of trauma or illness, and cognitive vulnerabilities that shape perceptions of health.

Biological Factors:

- Genetic Predisposition: An increased prevalence is seen among identical twins and first-degree relatives.
- Brain Function: Differences in brain areas linked to anxiety and emotional regulation have been observed in individuals with Illness anxiety disorder.
- Neurotransmitters: Imbalances in serotonin and dopamine may contribute to the development of Illness anxiety disorder.

Psychological and Behavioral Factors:

- Cognitive Distortions: People with Illness anxiety disorder often misinterpret minor symptoms as indicators of severe illnesses, resulting in excessive worry and negative thinking.
- Anxiety and Fear: In Illness anxiety disorder, individual's experiences fear and anxiety worrying about their health and the possibility of having a serious illness.
- Trauma and Abuse: Past experiences of trauma, abuse, or serious illnesses can heighten vulnerability to Illness anxiety disorder.
- Weak ego development
- Low self esteem and worthlessness
- Poor coping mechanisms
- Repressed anger
- Learned Behaviors: Growing up in an environment focused on health concerns or with a hypochondriac caregiver can contribute to developing Illness anxiety disorder.

Environmental Factors:

- Stressful Life Events: Significant stressors, like the loss of a loved one or a serious illness, can trigger Illness anxiety disorder.
- Exposure to Health Information: Excessive consumption of health-related content, especially online, can amplify anxiety about illnesses.
- Social Reinforcement: Repeatedly seeking reassurance from others regarding health concerns, even when unwarranted, may reinforce hypochondriacal behaviors.
- Absence of support systems

Additional Considerations:

- Co-occurring Conditions: Illness anxiety disorder often overlaps with other mental health conditions, such as depression, generalized anxiety disorder, or panic disorder.
- Medical History: Family experiences with severe illnesses may increase the risk of developing Illness anxiety disorder.

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- Personality Traits: Certain personality traits, such as excessive worry or perfectionism, may predispose individuals to Illness anxiety disorder.

Symptoms:

- Preoccupation with the fear of serious disease.
- Perceptual and cognitive abnormalities.
- Becoming easily alarmed about personal health status.
- Experiencing limited or no relief from medical reassurances, including doctor visits or negative test results.
- Excessive worry about specific medical conditions or inherited risks due to family history.
- Struggling with daily functioning due to fear of having serious illness.
- Depression
- Repeatedly examining the body for signs of disease or illness.
- Avoiding social interactions due to concerns about health risks.
- Continuously discussing health concerns or potential illnesses.
- Searching online obsessively for explanations of symptoms or information on possible illnesses.
- Seeking reassurance from loved ones about health concerns.

Treatment:

- An effective strategy is to cultivate a relationship that is supportive and accepting, while refraining from judgment of the client's actions. This approach can significantly contribute to reducing anxiety.
- Participating in group therapy can provide individuals with a platform to share their experiences related to illness, fostering connection and understanding which may help alleviate fear and reduce anxiety.
- Cognitive-Behavioral therapy (CBT) is in use and considered as the treatment of choice. It helps to connect between the thoughts, feelings and behaviors. CBT also includes education about normal somatic sensations and their normal variations.
- Medications like selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) have demonstrated their effectiveness in managing this condition.
- Talk therapy is also the best to replace the negative thoughts with the positive one.
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) empowers individuals to embrace challenging thoughts and emotions rather than resisting or suppressing them.
- Stress Management Techniques: Deep breathing exercises or progressive muscle relaxation can reduce stress and anxiety, promoting a sense of calm and well-being.

Complications:

Illness Anxiety Disorder (IAD) significantly disrupts daily life, impacting personal

relationships and causing difficulty in maintaining professional responsibilities. It often leads to financial burdens due to frequent medical consultations and rising healthcare costs. Individuals may develop substance dependencies, experience suicidal thoughts, and face an elevated risk of other psychiatric conditions such as major depression, personality disorders, and various anxiety disorders.

CONCLUSION

Individuals with Illness Anxiety Disorder (IAD) are deeply convinced that their symptoms indicate a serious illness. Their heightened apprehension and fear make them overly sensitive, reacting with alarm even to minor suggestions of a significant health condition. It should be diagnosed and treated since it impacts on daily life and functioning.

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