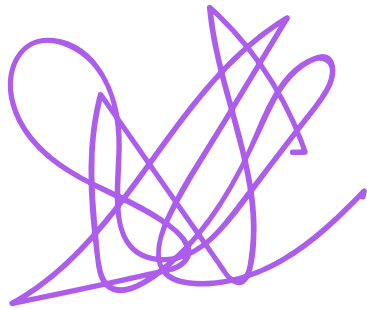
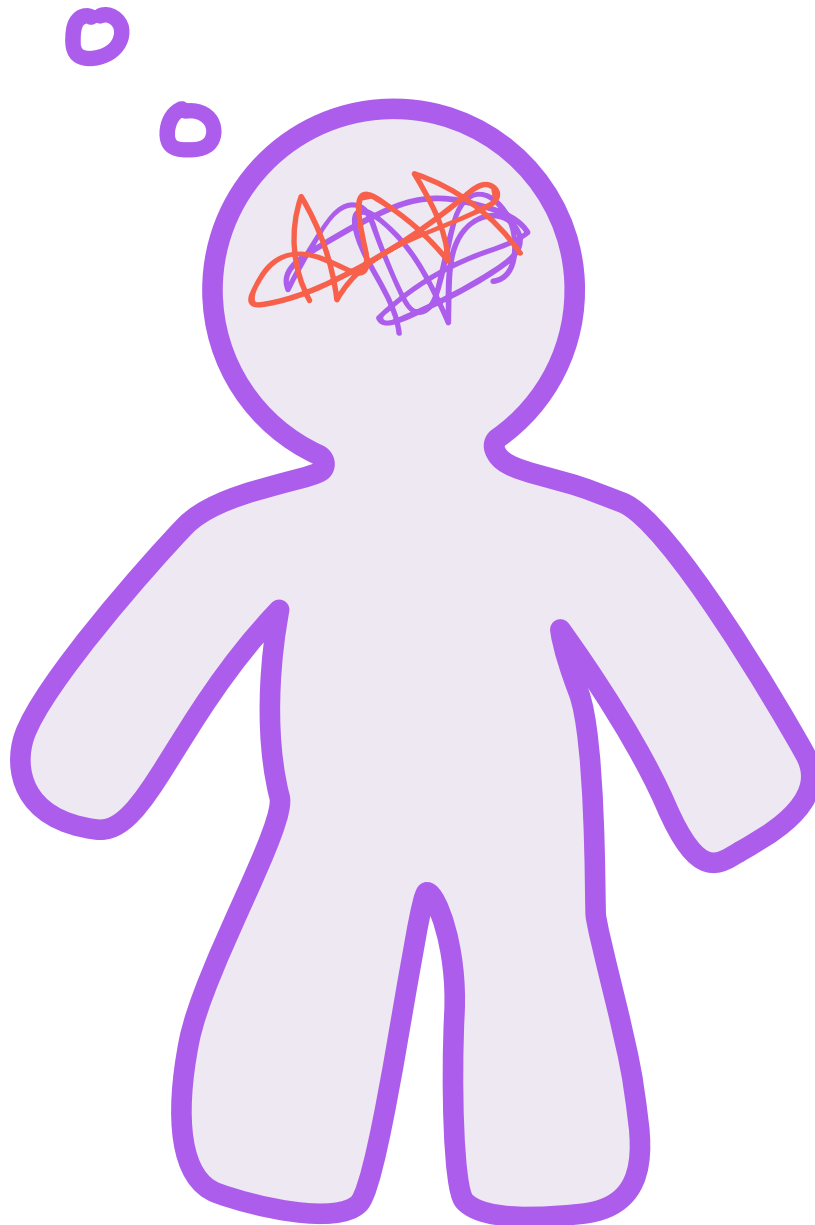


Bodysymptoms.



Thinking about
symptoms



What path do your thoughts lead you down?

Thinking and the brain

Thinking is one tool we have for interacting with the world. Thinking is helpful. It allows us to analyse situations by breaking them down to their parts. It also allows us to make plans.

The left and right sides of the brain are thought to understand the world in different ways. The right hemisphere of the brain is most in touch with the body and experiences life in the present moment. It understands reality through sensing, intuition and feeling.

The left hemisphere is the part of the brain capable of language. It can form thoughts and concepts. Language allows focus on details, analysis, and planning, but it also creates a sort of virtual reality. When we are lost in thoughts, we are always in the past or future, never quite existing in the present. The stories we tell ourselves can end up holding up a false mirror what is really going on.

Making sense of illness

The thinking mind is always trying to make sense of things.

This is especially true when we have new or confusing symptoms. Symptoms exist to alert us that a disease, injury or illness might need attention. Finding an explanation for a symptom can reassure us that we are not seriously ill and help us find a path to feeling better.

We all have beliefs about what kinds of things can cause symptoms and how the body works. Like the foundations of a building, our beliefs are often invisible, buried out of sight. The explanations we are drawn to about our symptoms are based on these hidden core beliefs.



One common belief is that the body is like a machine.

If we believe that the body is like a machine, we can think that symptoms are always directly related to a part of the body being injured, damaged or diseased.

If we believe that there must be damage to explain our symptoms, we will continue to look for a blood test or scan that will reveal that damage. We may see drugs or surgery as the only type of treatment that can help us.

If the tests keep coming back normal, or the treatments we're offered don't help, we remain confused and anxious.

Changing the story

Not all explanations are equally true or useful. The belief that the body is like a machine is common, but it is a poor reflection of reality.

Most of the time in medicine, symptoms do not correlate well with injury or tissue damage. Instead, research tells us that there are many processes going on in the brain and body that create and maintain symptoms.

It is helpful to be open minded about symptoms and what they might mean. How we explain our symptoms determines how we navigate the healthcare system and the things we do to care for ourselves.



The meaning of symptoms

Being open to thinking about symptoms in different ways can point to different routes to recovery.

For example, we can think of symptoms as messages from the body. Symptom messages make us aware of things that are out of balance in our lives, so we can make changes to stay healthy.

A symptom might also be nothing more than a memory trace from a previous illness, stored within neural circuits. Symptoms (once established) can keep running through the body, even after the initial trigger has passed. These sorts of symptoms may be sending us misleading messages, that can hold back recovery.

Rumination and worst-case thinking

Physical discomfort usually has a mental or emotional component; when the mind is not at ease, the body cannot be relaxed.

Rumination is a particular type of thinking that can keep us ill. When we ruminate, we get repetitive, anxious thoughts that go round and round. They can be about our health, financial problems, or existential issues like climate change or death.

Such worries seem logical on the surface. We hold on to worries because we believe that thinking about a particular issue or problem will protect us. However, rumination rarely leads us to helpful solutions.

At the same time, rumination has a measurable impact on the body. By increasing stress messages, it causes hyperventilation and prevents rest and repair. This can maintain functional symptoms.



If you have a busy mind that does not let you rest, finding ways to quieten thoughts may be a necessary step in recovery from bodily symptoms. Finding a way to help the mind connect with the body or the surroundings is usually the key to quietening thoughts. Tried and tested techniques to do this are sometimes called mindfulness.

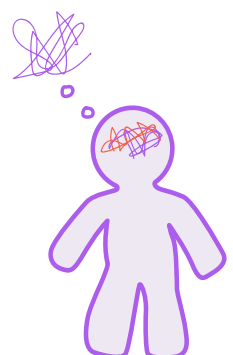
The other approach is to work with thoughts directly. Mantras are phrases that can be kept to hand to help cut through anxious thoughts. For example, if you always feel rushed and stressed, repeating phrases such as 'There is enough time' or 'This moment is enough' might help. Mantras like 'I am strong' or 'I can handle this' help some people. You can be creative and write some phrases which work for you.

Trust in the body to recover.

Trust is not easy. Especially if you have bodily memories of being unsafe, let down or taken advantage of.

Sometimes we don't dare expect to get better. We continue to believe that deep down there is a serious disease in the body that needs to be cured. We put pressure on ourselves to find out what it is and worry about letting our guard down in case we or our doctors miss something important that needs a specific treatment.

Trusting in the body's ability to heal and recover does not mean ignoring worrying or new symptoms. Medical tests can help us learn more about the physical condition of our tissues and what specific support they need to recover.



Bodysymptoms.

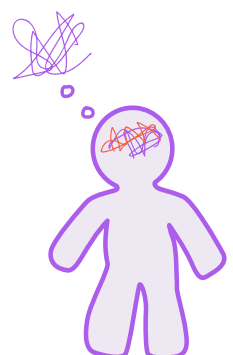
However when we expect to get better, this expectation helps. In medicine, the placebo response is often the most powerful part of a treatment. In functional somatic symptoms, placebo responses are known to be especially powerful. By allowing ourselves to trust the reality of the body's remarkable ability to change and heal, we allow ourselves to access this benefit.

Talking therapies (also known as psychological treatments), are often recommended as part of the treatment of FSS. It can especially help if you recognize that thought or emotional patterns make your symptoms worse, or if you have a difficult time speaking kindly to yourself.

Cognitive behavioural therapy is the treatment with the largest evidence base. There are also other evidence-based types of therapy. It varies which you can access through your local healthcare provision. It probably matters less what form the talking therapy takes. The important thing is to find a therapist who understands you and your difficulties.

When we feel trapped with our thought patterns, medication can be helpful. Anti-depressant medications, such as Duloxetine or Amitriptyline, are commonly prescribed for health anxiety, somatic symptom disorder and chronic pain.

These medications do not just improve mood. They can help the body relax and help new neural pathways to form. This can help us start the process of change when we feel trapped and helpless.



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