

Unexplained somatic complaints

Common, unexplained physical problems

- ➔ Headaches
- ➔ Chest pains
- ➔ Difficulty in breathing
- ➔ Difficulty in swallowing
- ➔ Nausea
- ➔ Vomiting
- ➔ Abdominal pain
- ➔ Lower back pain
- ➔ Skin rashes
- ➔ Frequent urination
- ➔ Diarrhoea
- ➔ Skin and muscle discomfort.

Associated worries and concerns

- ➔ Associated symptoms and problems
- ➔ Beliefs (about what is causing the symptoms)
- ➔ Fear (of what might happen).

Physical symptoms are real

A vicious circle can develop:

- ➔ Emotional stress can cause physical symptoms or make them worse.
- ➔ Physical symptoms can lead to more emotional stress.
- ➔ Emotional stress can make physical symptoms worse.

Headaches

Difficulty in swallowing

Chest pain/difficulty in breathing

Abdominal pain/nausea/vomiting

Frequent urination/diarrhoea/impotence

Skin rashes

➔ may all be caused or made worse by stress, anxiety worry, anger, depression

What treatments can help?

Supportive treatment most often needed:

- ➔ Effective reassurance, after history and detailed physical examination.
- ➔ Management of stress/life problems.
- ➔ Treatment of associated depression, anxiety, alcohol problems.
- ➔ Learning to relax.
- ➔ Avoiding patterns of negative thinking.
- ➔ Increasing levels of physical activity.
- ➔ Increasing positive/pleasurable activities.

Useful strategies

Reassurance

- ➔ Stress often produces physical symptoms or makes them worse.
- ➔ There are no signs of serious illness.
- ➔ You can benefit from learning strategies to reduce the impact of your symptoms.

Slow breathing to reduce common physical symptoms (eg muscle tension, hot and cold flushes, headaches, chest tightness)

- ➔ Breath in for three seconds and out for three seconds and pause for three seconds before breathing in again.
- ➔ Practise 10 minutes morning or night (five minutes is better than nothing).
- ➔ Use before and during situations that make you anxious.
- ➔ Regularly check and slow down breathing throughout the day.

Change attitudes and way of thinking

'I can't understand why the tests are negative. I feel the pain; it is probably something really unusual that I have.'

Instead: 'The pain is real, but I've been checked out physically and I have had all the relevant tests. Many other things, such as worry and stress, can cause these pains.'

'Maybe my doctor has missed something. I should try another doctor or better still a specialist instead.'

Instead: 'It is very unlikely that these doctors have missed something. It is unlikely that a specialist would say anything different. Maybe I should examine whether stress, tension, or my lifestyle is contributing to the pain.'

'Why won't this pain go away. I'm not feeling well; I've probably got cancer.'

Instead: 'This is not the first time that I've thought that there was *something* terribly *wrong* and *in fact* nothing serious developed. I should learn to relax and focus my thoughts on other things to distract myself from the pains.'

Increase level of physical activity

A little activity
one or two times a week
(eg walking)



Inactive

Daily activities —
not much effort
(eg fast walking,
shopping, cleaning)



Some activity

Activity that makes
you out of breath for
20 minutes or more,
three to five times a week
(eg jogging)



Active