

See What's Left

Category: Worry

written by Anonymous | May 2, 2018

The other day I asked my husband, "How many times a day do you worry about your body or your health?" His reply, "one or two," shocked me. My answer: *At least fifty.*

As a soon-to-be clinical psychologist, I am all too familiar with health anxiety. I should clarify: all too familiar with health anxiety as a diagnosis (illness anxiety disorder) applied to someone else. It has taken a long time for me to acknowledge that I, too, am a member of this club.

Sometimes I feel I have two selves. There's the fun one, the carefree one, who inhabits my physical body and actually lives my life. And then there's the obsessive one, the one who follows her around with a clipboard, the one who inspects and interprets her physical body, the one who decides how afraid she should be.

Health anxiety can be surprisingly resistant to reality, especially when there are genuine physical signs and symptoms. I can't remember the last time I could accurately interpret a new sensation in my body without first going to the worst-case scenario. Feeling light-headed (after an intense workout)? It must be a blood clot, which will eventually lead to a stroke. Forgot why I came into the kitchen (because I was on the phone at the same time)? It must be early-onset Alzheimer's disease.

On paper my worries sound ridiculous, and, I can imagine, even offensive to those who have experienced a true health catastrophe. But when I'm in that spiral of anxiety, it's terrifying and exhausting.

I recently attended a workshop on health anxiety for psychologists and psychotherapists. Throughout the day, the facilitator repeated something he often says to his patients, and it has come to serve as somewhat of a mantra for me in times of worry: "You may have [illness X] and you may not. The problem we can address here and now is that you are anxious about your health. Let's deal with the anxiety first, and then see what's left."

Anonymous