

Hypochondriacs think of symptoms in 'catastrophic' way: study

Dalhousie University study looks at thought processes of people dealing with high health anxiety

By Teghan Beaudette, [CBC News](#) Posted: May 13, 2014 5:30 AM AT Last Updated: May 13, 2014 5:30 AM AT

A new study from Dalhousie University in Halifax is helping psychologists better understand the thought processes of people who suffer from hypochondria.

"They take normal bodily sensations that people would have — like an upset stomach or heart palpitation — and they would think about it in a catastrophic way," said Chantal Gautreau, a researcher on the study.

Gautreau's research looked at the difference between people who have an excess of health anxiety — commonly known as hypochondriacs — and those who have a normal amount.

She surveyed 450 undergraduate students at Dalhousie University on how they think about their health and found people with high levels of health anxiety tend to jump to the worst possible conclusion.

"They feel some sort of body sensation like a heart palpitation and then they automatically think, 'Oh, I have heart disease.' This actually maintains the anxiety sensations," said Gautreau.

"It becomes a cycle."

First research of its kind

Dr. Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and professor at Dalhousie University, oversaw Gautreau's research.

He said what seems like an obvious conclusion — that hypochondriacs think the worst and that only increases their overall anxiety — has actually never been proven before.

According to Sherry, there was a gap in the research surrounding health anxiety and hypochondriasis until now.

Health anxiety and hypochondriasis are often overlooked as serious problems, Sherry said.

"Usually [people with hypochondria have] pursued expensive medical care and often costly, invasive and painful interventions that were unnecessary," he said.

Sherry said sometimes the anxiety is so severe, it ends up causing physical problems.

"I once helped someone who rubbed their neck so many times they actually created inflammation in that area," he

said.

The problems aren't just for the patients — taxpayers end up footing the bill for a litany of appointments and tests that ultimately prove to be unnecessary.

Sherry said you may want to consider seeing a psychologist if you can't shake the feeling you are seriously ill or may become seriously ill and if those worries are interfering with your day to day life, including work or relationships.

He said it's also important to remember a certain amount of "bodily noise" is normal.

"Aches, pains, owies, indigestion and so forth are a normal range experience and to not blow that out of proportion is an important realization," he said.