

Mental Disorders in Primary Care

Unexplained

Somatic Complaints

Common unexplained physical problems

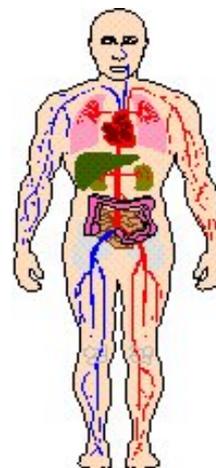
- Headaches
- Chest pains
- Difficulty in breathing
- Difficulty in swallowing
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Lower back pain
- Skin rashes
- Frequent urination
- Diarrhoea
- Skin and muscle discomfort

Associated worries and concerns

- Associated symptoms and problems
- Beliefs (what is causing the symptoms)
- Fears (what might happen)

Physical symptoms are real

- Emotional stress can cause physical symptoms
- 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

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:

- This does not mean that there is nothing wrong
- You are not going to develop a serious illness
- There is something wrong, but it is not caused by physical disease

Slow breathing to reduce common physical symptoms:

e.g. Muscle tension hot and cold flushes, headaches, chest tightness:

- Breath in for 3 seconds and out for 3 seconds and pause for 3 seconds before breathing in again
- Practice 10 minutes morning or night (5 minutes is better than nothing)
- Use before and during situations that make you anxious
- Regularly check and slow down breathing throughout the day

Changing attitudes and ways of thinking:

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

Replace with

"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"

Replace with

"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:"

Replace with

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

Increasing level of physical activity:

A little activity
1 or 2 times a week
e.g. walking



Inactive

Daily activities -
not much effort,
e.g., fast walking,
shopping, cleaning



Some activity

Activity that makes
you out of breath for
20 minutes or more,
3-5 times a week
e.g. jogging



Active



Unexplained Somatic complaints

**Unexplained somatic complaints
can be overcome**

Unexplained Somatic complaints

Unexplained somatic complaints can be overcome

An important message

You have been worried about your health because of symptoms which you have been experiencing for which no physical cause can be found. **First of all:** It is important for you to know that this does not mean that you are really not experiencing these symptoms. It simply means that something is wrong, but it is not caused by physical problems and you are not suffering from a serious medical illness. *You know* that you are not imagining your symptoms or lying about them. You need to know that other people who are trying *to* help you understand that too. We will give you information to help you to consider other ways of looking at what might be causing the symptoms and to help you to manage the symptoms.

How stress and tension can lead to physical symptoms

First - Worry and tension can cause you to tighten up your muscles. When this lasts for some time these muscles can become painful. For example, when this happens to the muscles at the back of the neck it leads to a headache. When muscles around the bowel contract it leads to stomach pains.

Second - When you get tense and anxious this causes a substance called adrenaline to be released into your body. This can be very helpful in making you more alert and prepared to deal with problems. At the same time, this substance can cause many unpleasant physical symptoms in all parts of your body, such as pounding heart, chest pains, etc.

Third - Breathing too quickly or deeply (also known as hyperventilation) decreases levels of carbon dioxide and the acid content of the blood. This leads to less oxygen getting to your brain and your body, which in turn leads to physical symptoms of anxiety. These symptoms include dizziness, light-headedness, breathlessness, smothering feelings, feelings of unreality, pounding heart, tingling sensation and so on.

Fourth - If you are feeling down or fed up with things you are much more likely to focus on your bodily sensations and more likely to worry about them than when you are feeling cheerful.

Fifth - Physical symptoms tend to have a pattern. They may come at times when you are under stress or at times when you do not have enough to keep you occupied. Try to keep a diary sheet, to work out when your symptoms occur. Each day of the week write what your symptoms you experienced, how severe they were (you can rate them from 1 to 10), what you were doing and how you were feeling.

Finally - You may concentrate on some symptoms more than others. If a member of your family or a close friend has had a life-threatening illness which began with the symptoms that you are experiencing now, you will tend to worry more about this and think about it more than you might have done for some other symptom.

It may have been also suggested to you that other types of emotional problems such as depression and/or anxiety may be playing a part in how badly you have been feeling. Depression and anxiety can cause symptoms.

People who have physical symptoms can get depressed and anxious about them.

What is depression?

Many people use the word 'depression' to describe feelings of sadness or loss. These feelings often pass within a few hours or a few days. During this time people are unable to carry out their normal activity. The clinical disorder called depression is different from the feelings of sadness. When depressed, sad feelings are felt much more intensely and for longer periods. It is common to lose interest in activities previously enjoyed. Even carrying out day-to-day activities can become very difficult. Depression can disrupt important areas of your life, including your work, social and family life. It can get so bad that the person suffering from depression may think of suicide. Depression can also affect people in many other ways:

- disturbed sleep
- feelings of guilt
- changes in appetite
- physical aches and pains
- lack of energy and motivation

What is anxiety?

The word 'anxiety' is used to describe the mental and physical response to fearful or threatening situations. This reaction may include: trembling, feelings of choking, increased heart beat, sweating and feelings of unreality and so on. Anxiety is a normal response experienced by everyone at times. Nearly being hit by a car, sitting for an exam or giving a public talk are all examples of situations in which most people will experience anxiety. However, anxiety becomes a problem when it starts to interfere with your life in an ongoing and persistent way. You are likely to be suffering from an anxiety disorder if you have any of the following:

- the anxiety reaction occurs frequently
- it interferes with your work, family and social life
- your fears are out of proportion to the situation
- you start to avoid feared situations

A few words about alcohol

Some people find that alcohol can make physical symptoms worse and in the long run can make the existing problem worse. Guidelines for what is 'low risk' drinking are presented below. Individuals will differ in terms of what level will cause harm. ***Keep in mind that the less you drink the better it is for you.***

- **For men**
up to 3 standard drinks per day, no alcoholic drinking for two days a week, a maximum of 15 standard drinks per week
- **For women**
up to 2 standard drinks per day, no alcoholic drinking for two days a week, a maximum of 10 standard drinks per week

A standard drink refers to:



1 standart
bottle of
regular beer
(285 ml)



1 single
measure of
spritis
(30 ml)



1-8 oz. Glass
of wine
(120 ml)



1 measure of
aperitif
(60 ml)

In a typical day, how many standard drinks do you have?
On how many days in a typical week do you drink?
Is this above the safe limit for your gender?

How to treat depression and anxiety

If you have symptoms of depression and anxiety in addition to the physical symptoms that worry you, you may want to know about the treatments that are available.

Treating depression

Depression can be treated in different ways. The most common ways are to use medication and counselling. Counselling is always useful but for some depressions, it is not enough and it should be accompanied with medication.

Medication is recommended when

- depression is moderate or severe or prevents you from doing your day-to-day tasks
- thoughts of hurting yourself are present
- close relatives have depression or have suffered from depression
- you have had previous episodes of depression
- you have responded well to medication in the past
- it is your own preference for treatment

Treating anxiety

The best way to treat ongoing anxiety is through counselling. Effective methods of counselling are available to:

- control and stop panic attacks
- confront feared situations previously avoided
- change negative and unrealistic thinking and reduce worry

Medication can reduce anxiety, but it is only useful in the short term. Long term use can lead to addiction. This means you have to use more and more of medication to help you and when you stop taking it, your symptoms can be much worse.

Short term use of medication is recommended only when

- it is used for brief anxiety reactions
- the anxiety experienced is very severe and counselling is also being used

How to overcome unexplained physical problems

We hope that the above information gives you a better understanding of what causes unexplained physical symptoms and how they can be linked to your emotions, worries and problems.

We will now describe some strategies to help you overcome your symptoms. You might find some strategies are more helpful than others.

Remember, you need support from your family and friends

1 Record symptoms

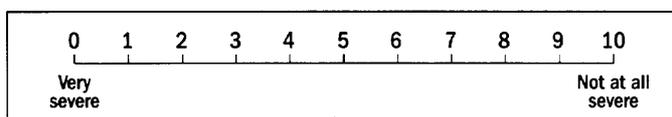
If you want to see the link between your feelings, day-to-day problems and your physical symptoms, try keeping a diary sheet for each day over the next week.

- write each physical symptom that you have
- write how severe each symptom is between 0 and 10 (0 - very severe, 10 - not severe)
- write what you were doing and how you were feeling when you had your symptoms

Diary sheet				
Week _____	Symptom	Severity	What I was doing?	How I was feeling?
e.g.	<i>Stomach pain</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>Meeting a deadline</i>	<i>Low mood</i>
Monday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Tuesday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Wednesday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Thursday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Friday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Saturday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Sunday	_____	_____	_____	_____

Diary sheet				
Week _____	Symptom	Severity	What I was doing?	How I was feeling?
e.g.	<i>Severe headache</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>Preparing a dinner party</i>	<i>Anxious</i>
Monday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Tuesday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Wednesday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Thursday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Friday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Saturday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Sunday	_____	_____	_____	_____

Diary sheet				
Week _____	Symptom	Severity	What I was doing?	How I was feeling?
e.g.	<i>Back pain</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>Spring cleaning</i>	<i>Tired</i>
Monday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Tuesday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Wednesday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Thursday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Friday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Saturday	_____	_____	_____	_____
Sunday	_____	_____	_____	_____



2 Learn slow breathing

Slow breathing will help to reduce common physical such as muscle tension, hot and cold flushes, headaches, and chest tightness. When you get certain physical symptoms, for example, breathlessness, it feels like you are not breathing enough. The natural response is to breathe in more. However, if you do try to get more air in by breathing in more, this will make the problem worse. The best solution is to slow down your breathing *even* though you may feel that you should speed it up. Now we will show you a slow breathing technique which can help to reduce many different physical symptoms. Remember to breathe in using your abdomen (not your chest) and through your nose.

- breathe in slowly to the count of 3 seconds.
- when you get to 3, slowly breathe out to the count of 3 pause for 3 seconds. before breathing in again
- after 5 minutes. or so, say the word 'relax' to yourself as you breathe out
 - practise twice a day for 10 min. (5 min. is better than nothing)
 - regularly check and slow down your breathing during the day
 - use slow breathing whenever you get tense and worried about your symptoms
 - use this technique before and during situations that make your symptoms worse

3 Identify problems in your life

We all experience problems in life and sometimes they can trigger physical symptoms as well as depression or anxiety. Was there anything that bothered you before your symptoms began? If so please write them down:

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4 Working out a strategy to deal with problems

Often problems that never get solved can trigger off symptoms in our bodies. Think about the problems that you have listed. You can work through each of them using the following strategy.

Discuss the problem with a trusted person

Then write down what you believe to be the major difficulties

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Distance yourself to look at the problem

Write down what an observer would think of the problem

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Work out options for dealing with the problem

What options do you have? What do other people think?

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Examine the pros and cons of each option

Sometimes there is no easy answer and all options seem unpleasant. Try to evaluate the pros and cons of each option.

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Set a time frame to solve problems

Deadlines are useful because they spur us into action. Try to set realistic deadlines.

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Decide on a step-by- step action plan

Working through the problems can seem overwhelming. Plan the steps that you need to take to solve the problem.

Action

Date

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5 Identify negative thinking and attitudes

When people start to feel unwell they often tend to think negatively their symptoms. Negative thinking can also trigger depression and can slow down recovery. There are differences in the way people think. *Some* people think in mostly positive terms while others think in negative terms. Can you relate to the examples below?

You have had investigations and the tests are negative

Person A

I can't understand why
I must have something really serious
They will never find it

Person B

OK' I still have the pain
At least it is nothing serious
If I worry about it I will feel worse

Increased pain

Pain gets better

If you tend to think or react like person A, it is likely that you have a negative way of thinking. Here are some more examples of other negative thoughts or beliefs.

Mark the statements that apply to you.

Pain is always a sign of really serious illness
Physical symptoms are always a sign that there is something wrong with your body
It is impossible to know with absolute certainty that I am not ill
If I do not feel well I have to find out exactly what is wrong
Doctors never tell you the truth
You can't trust anyone to get it right when you are sick

6 How do you change the way you think

It is likely that you have been thinking in a negative way for some time. It will take time and a lot of practice to change these ways.

Here are some tips:

First, ask yourself is this belief that I have true?

- Consult someone outside the situation for their opinion
- Ask yourself if everyone would have the same belief in this situation
- Examine other possible explanations for the occurrence of the symptoms

Second, counter each negative/unreasonable thought with more realistic ones.

- These should be opposite to the unreasonable belief
- They should be realistic statements
- There should be as many counters as possible

The following example shows how negative and positive thoughts can lead to different reactions to the same situation.

SITUATION: Developed a new rash on one leg which the doctor said you should not worry about

Unreasonable/negative thoughts:

- My sister had a rash like that and she developed arthritis
- My doctor is not telling me the truth
- I should see a specialist
- This could spread much further

Resulting feelings: Worry and more physical symptoms brought on by anxiety

Reasonable/positive thoughts:

- My doctor says there is nothing wrong but he will continue to monitor it
- There is no reason why he should not tell me the truth
- Many people get rashes and don't develop arthritis
- There is nothing else I can do about it just now
- Apart from this I feel well

Resulting feelings: Acceptance; able to stop worrying

Now you can work through your own examples. Write down situations that have made you unhappy and any negative thoughts that you may have had and the resulting feelings.

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Remember: It will take time to change the way you think and feel.

7 Plan and increase your level of activity

When you are not getting very much exercise, you can start to feel weaker and notice even more symptoms. This is because when we do not exercise our muscles begin to waste away and we feel less fit.

Set goals for increasing your level of activity over the next four weeks.

If you are over 65 years of age or have signs of heart disease you should consult your doctor before starting an exercise routine. Remember to build up your level of activity gradually.

My goals are

Week 1

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Week 2

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Week 3

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Week 4

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Week 5

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8 Keeping a record

Start off by writing down exactly what your main symptoms are at this moment. This will help you to begin to monitor your progress. Mark on the lines how severe the symptoms actually are. Also give yourself an overall rating of how you feel from the scale provided. Each week mark the overall severity of your symptoms on the graph provided.

Example of symptom record form		
Date	<i>February 27</i>	
1) Symptom: Disturbed sleep		
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all severe <input type="checkbox"/>
2) Symptom:		
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all severe <input type="checkbox"/>

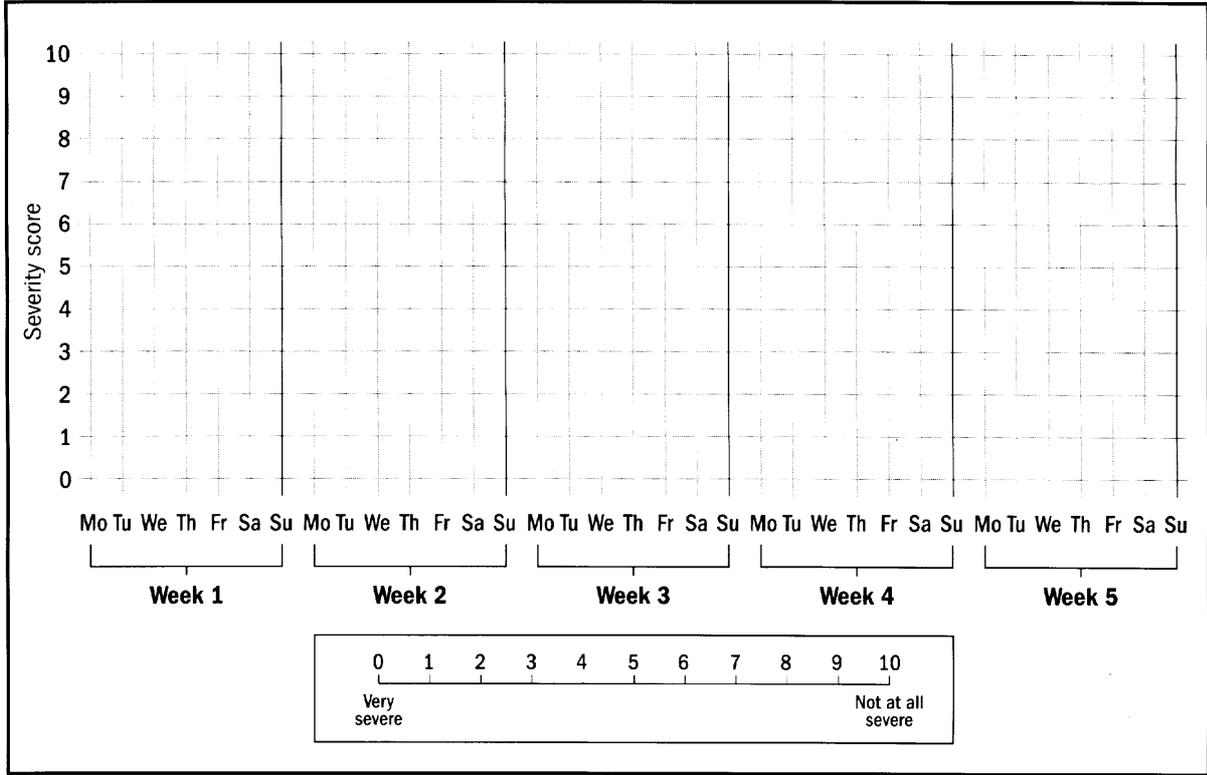
Example of symptom record form

Date	_____	
1) Symptom:	_____	
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all severe <input type="checkbox"/>
2) Symptom:	_____	
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all severe <input type="checkbox"/>
3) Symptom:	_____	
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all severe <input type="checkbox"/>

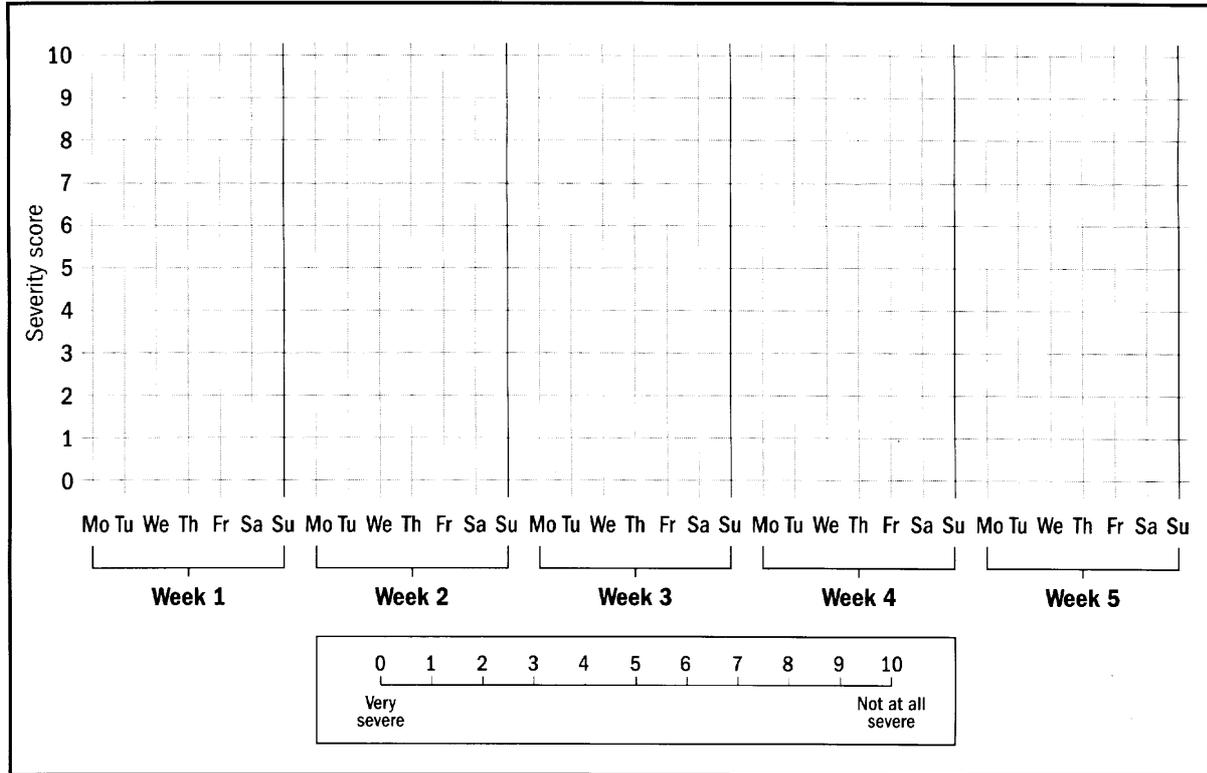
Example of symptom record form

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1) Symptom:	_____	
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all severe <input type="checkbox"/>
2) Symptom:	_____	
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all severe <input type="checkbox"/>
3) Symptom:	_____	
Very severe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Severe <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all severe <input type="checkbox"/>

Personal progress chart



Personal progress chart



Notes

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Medication information

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Self-help groups

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Counselors

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Doctors

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Help lines

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Suggested reading

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Other materials

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ICD-10 PC: Questionnaire for

Unexplained Somatic Complaints

During the *last month* have you had any of the following most of the time? If yes, please check or mark the relevant box.

- I. Have you been bothered by continuing aches or pains or other physical complaints for which a physical has not been found (e.g. nausea/vomiting, diarrhoea, shortness of breath, chest pain, headaches, abdominal pain)?

If YES to the above, continue below

1. Have you seen more than one doctor for these problems?
2. Have you seen specialists about these problems?
3. Have you experienced these pains or different physical problems for longer than 6 months?
4. Have you been feeling sad?
5. Have you lost interest in things that you enjoyed previously
6. Are you often worried, anxious or tense?
7. How much alcohol do you drink in a typical week?

I. During the last month have you been limited in one or more of the following areas most of the time:

- Self care: bathing, dressing, eating?
- Family relations: spouse, children, relatives?
- Going to work or school?
- Doing housework or household tasks?
- Social activities, seeing friends, hobbies?
- Remembering things?

II. Because of these problems during the last month:

How many days were you unable to fully carry out your usual daily activities? _____

How many days did you spend in bed in order to rest? _____