

[38] Cyberchondria as an emerging trans-diagnostic digital compulsive syndrome: An updated systematic review and clinical case report

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Introduction: Cyberchondria (CYB), a term coined by the UK Press in the 1990s [1], represents a poorly characterized syndrome involving the urge-driven tendency to excessively seek health or illness-related information on the Internet. Intended to provide reassurance, searching is thought to end up increasing anxiety and distress, uncertainty and reinforcing CYB [2]. CYB may be differentiated from non-pathological information-seeking by compulsive characteristics [2]. A recent meta-analysis [3] found CYB to be associated with “health anxiety” broadly defined. CYB may even represent a trans-diagnostic digital compulsive syndrome. However, the extent to which CYB contributes to the psychopathology of compulsive psychiatric disorders, such as illness anxiety disorder (hypochondriasis), obsessive-compulsive and related disorders (OCRD) or other online disorders of behavioral addiction, is not understood.

Aims: We describe one of the first reported cases of a treatment-seeking patient with DSM-5 illness anxiety disorder and disabling CYB. We review the available peer-reviewed published knowledge on the association between CYB and psychiatric disorders.

Methods: Updated search of PubMed, PsycINFO, Cochrane Library. Search terms: “cyberchondria”, “cyberchondriasis”.

Results: 30 original research studies of CYB were found, including five involving >1500 participants since the latest known published review [3]. No consensus definition of CYB was established. Existing studies were exclusively cross-sectional and recruited from general population samples; there were no descriptions of CYB in clinical samples. Data on the epidemiology, sociodemographic and clinical characteristics and associated comorbidities were scarce. A scale has been developed to quantify CYB severity in the general population [4]. CYB was variously found to correlate with the presence of health anxiety broadly defined, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, problematic use of the internet, and other psychological constructs (intolerance of uncertainty, anxiety sensitivity, pain catastrophizing, metacognitive beliefs) [3]. Only psychoeducation was suggested as a possible therapeutic approach.

Conclusions: Research on CYB remains in its infancy. Further studies are warranted to understand CYB in terms of definition, clinical features, measurement, relationship with hypochondriasis and other compulsive disorders and therapeutic interventions.

References:

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