Cyber health paranoia

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Picture this: you've discovered a blemish on your hand. It's itchy, but not alarmingly so, though the look of it is. You decide to do a bit of internet research to find out whether you should be worried. Enter 'red flaky skin' into Google's magic box and voila! The first few links are for skin cancer.

Ok, now you're worried. You begin to read — first link, second link. You've got leads now — and not only is your one symptom pointing to a "fatal and rare cancer form" but you've noticed a lack of appetite recently — another symptom. Oh no! Dizzy — another sign? Wait, didn't you have to take a breather on the bench at the mall on Saturday from a brief dizzy spell? And you thought it was a sugar low.

If there's a time to panic, it certainly seems like now is good. But stop. It's not worth getting your knickers in a knot over a few internet links. You're a rational person, so why do you believe the few symptoms you've read on the internet so completely? Never stopped to think about it that way? That goes for almost eighty percent of internet users worldwide. It's even got a name: cyberchondria. You bet.

Hypochondria's evil twin is on the rise. Where hypochondria is a psychological disorder suffered by a small amount of people worldwide, *cyber*chondria seems to effect even the most rational among us. Let's face it, we're all guilty of showing a little paranoia about a symptom or two.

Just one symptom

Similar to hypochondriacs, cyberchondriacs will fixate on a particular symptom, believing it to be potentially fatal. While searching for explanation of a symptom online, cyberchondriacs tend to latch onto the worst diagnoses they come across, obsessing over the symptoms and working themselves up into a froth of anxiety. But it doesn't make sense to make your own diagnosis based on information you may have read online. Especially if you haven't checked your sources.

Jumping to conclusions

The well known fallacy is called the "Base Rate Neglect" fallacy and explains why there are so many of us suffering from cyberchondria. Simply put, most of us suffer from jumping to conclusions without getting hold of correct information or, just choosing to believe the insufficient information we come across.

The fallacy explains how you could believe a hypothesis that gives some evidence of one thing without taking into consideration the prior probability or, statistical and overall factual evidence that contribute to the reasonable possibility of that hypothesis actually being true.

For example, to believe that your skin blemish is a rare cancer when you have a) only read one or two pop-psychology pieces online and have not checked their credibility and b) you haven't taken into consideration that the pieces you have read also say that the cancer is both rare and only found in people that carry a specific gene, is totally blowing your symptoms out of proportion. How on earth could you possibly know that's you?

Online medical students

Microsoft researcher and himself a medical doctor, Eric Horvitz, explains to The Independent UK: "The same thing happened before the internet. I remember getting worried when I was studying medicine. According to one study, up to 75 per cent of first- and second-year medical students end up thinking they have one significant yet imaginary disease based on what they're learning – some call it 'medical school-itis'."

In some respects, our easy access to medical information makes internet users prone to the same psychoses. In other words, while we're intelligent and rational, at some stage we'll fall prey to an internet diagnosis.

The cure

So what is the solution? See a doctor? Stop surfing the internet? Apparently not. Contrary to all of the above, the availability of medical information online has made us more aware and attentive to our health. Many, including doctors, believe that education and awareness surrounding health has never been so popular. People are more interested in their health and take better care of themselves as a result. So while knowledge found on the internet may not be complete, it's better than no knowledge at all. The important part is acknowledging the potential shortfalls of your concerns and following up to see a doctor.

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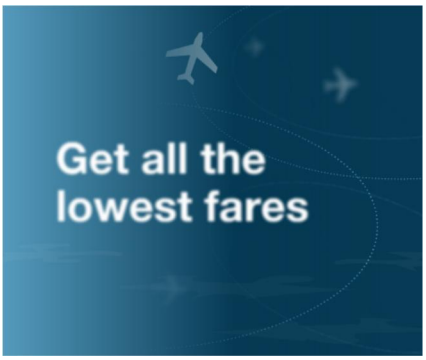

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