Chapter 7
Cognitive Behavioral Perspective on the Conceptualization and Treatment of Cyberchondria

Rukiye Tekdemir

Department of Psychiatry, Atatürk Chest Diseases and Thoracic Surgery Training and Research Hospital, Turkey

Ali Kandeğer

Faculty of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, Selcuk University, Turkey

Yavuz Selvi

Faculty of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, Selcuk University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

Currently, the use of the internet has become an impenetrable part of everyday life, and the use of the internet for the purpose of obtaining medical information has also become widespread. Although the psychological mechanisms underlying cyberchondria are not clear enough, studies emphasize that some psychological constructs are risk factors in the development of cyberchondria. There is no standard treatment for cyberchondria; it is important to determine case-specific formulations and treatment targets in treatment. Psychoeducation and also different therapy techniques can be used for the treatment of cyberchondria occurring in different contexts in the cognitive-behavioural approach. Cyberchondria, due to developing technology and the increasing space that the internet occupies in our lives, is likely to be more talked about and studied in the coming years. In this review, cyberchondria will be evaluated from a cognitive behavioral perspective, and the methods used in its treatment will be briefly mentioned.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the Internet has become an indispensable part of daily life, and using it to obtain medical information has become widespread. A study involving 12,000 people from various countries found that 12% to 40% frequently searched the Internet for medical information, and about half used the Internet to self-diagnose (Vismara et al., 2020). A similar study conducted in the United States reported that almost 70% of adults searched for medical information online, and 35% used the Internet to diagnose illness (Fox & Duggan, 2013). The number of internet sites providing medical knowledge and the search behavior on them is increasing. This increase may, in part, be because it is easy, fast, private, and free to find desired medical information by searching online. Gaining such information from the Internet is especially beneficial for low socioeconomic status or limited access to medical services (Starcevic & Berle, 2013).

Furthermore, obtaining health information from reliable, evidence-based online sources (i.e., online health information literacy) enables people to make more informed choices about their health and healthcare. While the Internet facilitates easy management of many life processes, however, it can also be harmful. For example, health-related information on the Internet often contains unreliable, messy, and technical language, making users vulnerable to misunderstanding. In addition, sensational, rare, and life-threatening conditions are often highlighted on health websites, which may unnecessarily increase users' perceived risk and anxiety, even when their symptoms are not severe (Vismara et al., 2020; White & Horvitz, 2009).

There is a bidirectional relationship between searching for health information online and health anxiety (McMullan et al., 2019). That is, those more concerned about their health tend to search for health-related information on the Internet more frequently and for more extended periods, but searching for health information online may also increase an individual's health anxiety. This health anxiety caused by online searches may, in turn, encourage more detailed inquiries to seek reassurance. Such online searching also improves patients' self-diagnosis, adversely affecting physician-patient relations (McMullan et al., 2019).

People may also have difficulty distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources of online information, an understanding that is likely affected by education level, information processing capacity, and technical knowledge. Users may regard information obtained through unreliable websites as accurate, though it may contain inconsistencies and uncertainties (McManus et al., 2015).

Cyberchondria is generally characterized by excessive or repeated online health research (OHR) reinforcing health anxiety (Aiken & Kirwan, 2013; Starcevic & Berle, 2013). It is essential to note the distinction between OHR and cyberchondria. OHR itself is not cyberchondria, which involves spending excessive amounts of time online (at the expense of more productive activities), repetitive searches, and increased anxiety after a search (Muse et al., 2012). Although the term "cyberchondria" first appeared in the mid-1990s, the concept has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers and has been frequently studied in recent years (Loos, 2013). With the increasing influence of the Internet in our lives, cyberchondria is likely to continue being discussed and studied in the coming years.

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