

The Health Super-Scanner



Some people can sleep through anything – partners snoring, trains speeding by and thunderstorms. Yet those same people, after certain unpleasant experiences or thoughts, can be woken by the slightest occurrence of a particular signal. They are reacting to our inbuilt “scanner”, a hangover from our primitive survival mechanism that keeps us alert to particular indicators, even when we’re sleeping. It’s constantly scanning for the signal, then triggering the body’s alarm system which wakes us up, even from the deepest sleep, to attend to the perceived threat or imaginary emergency.

Sometimes these inbuilt super-scanners are programmed to look for other signals, and it seems the sensitivity can vary. Someone who worries about being burgled might have a super-scanner which is set to be highly sensitive to noises that are different from those we normally hear at night. A knocking sound will have them instantly awake, alert and anxious. On investigation, they might realise it was a twig tapping against the window, the anxiety subsides – and they can sleep reassured they’re safe.

If you worry a lot about your health, you perhaps might have a super-scanner that is highly sensitive to picking up on body sensations. You can be going about your daily life, when suddenly, the constantly on and alert super-sensitive-scanner, notices something different: a slight pain, an ache, a numbness, a tingling – anything. This super-scanner can even be activated by thought alone, before any bodily sensation is present, but as soon as it is activated, physical symptoms will commence or begin to increase. This scanner immediately draws your focus of attention to the sensation. You might think, “Hey, what’s that? I might be ill”. You feel anxious, and the body’s alarm system is activated: adrenaline is released into the bloodstream, which then itself triggers a whole host of further physical symptoms:

- ✚ Heart racing
- ✚ Breathing faster
- ✚ Light-headed
- ✚ Tense muscles
- ✚ Aches & pains
- ✚ Shaking
- ✚ Hot
- ✚ Sweating
- ✚ Nausea
- ✚ Dizziness
- ✚ Unable to concentrate
- ✚ Butterflies in the stomach



These symptoms reinforce the anxious thoughts, and the super-scanner draws the focus of attention even more to what's happening in your body. Thoughts then might develop into "catastrophising": "I'm in danger here. I might collapse. I really am ill". The feelings of anxiety intensify, and the whole focus of attention is now on what you're feeling. You then think: "That confirms it. I really must be seriously ill". This reinforces the underlying belief that you could be very ill or likely to become so, and makes it more likely that this cycle will keep happening.

We can learn to notice the super-scanner, and turn the sensitivity dial down. It can be a useful mechanism so we don't want to turn it off completely, but we can improve our ability to interpret the readings accurately, and adjust the way we react to the scanner:

- ✚ **Notice the scanner:** "That's that (super-sensitive) scanner again!"
- ✚ **Readjust the sensitivity dial:** "Okay, the scanner is noticing the(physical sensations). I'm thinking the worst about that, but it's probably just a normal body sensation. The other symptoms are due to anxiety."
- ✚ **There's no need to fight the thoughts:** you can notice them, and let them pass.
- ✚ **Change your focus of attention:** Move on – do or think about something else.

The vicious cycle of Health Anxiety:

Underlying belief: "I could become seriously ill with a life-threatening illness"

