



Write
Company
Plus

Dr. Kathleen A. Begley
The Write Woman
KBegley@writecompanyplus.com
610-429-1562

How to Cope with Medical Fears

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley recently launched a new blog called "Meandering to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her one-paragraph musings on politics, business, and anything else that strikes her fancy.*

During the past few years, I have suffered from degenerating kidneys, chronic psoriasis, lupus, kidney stones, and terminal cancer in several different major organs. As a matter of fact, I get a bout with the dreaded Big C every few months. When a nationwide outbreak of swine flu occurs before the end of the year as predicted by the Centers for Disease Controls (CDC), I'm quite certain I'll be the first in my neighborhood to get it.

If I survive, which is unlikely, I'd put money on my contracting another dreaded illness before the arrival of 2010. I'm thinking ebola. Cedars Sinai emergency room in Los Angeles, here I come. New York Presbyterian, you better prepare for me, too. If I were you, Cleveland Clinic, I also would immediately upsize the staff in anticipation of my arrival. I figure it will take a village of hospitals all over the country to deal with my neurosis.

I fall prey to all these illnesses, at least in my mind, from continually searching the Internet whenever I get the slightest ache in my back or congestion in my chest. Invariably, I come across maladies I've never ever heard of. As you probably know, my tendency to believe I have every disease known to womankind used to be called hypochondria. But I have a more modern version. It's one suffered, and I mean suffered, by people who surf the Internet every time a sniffle occurs.

It's called cyberchondria You think I jest? Microsoft, the acknowledged giant of the computer field, was so concerned about its search engines throwing people like me into a state of constant anxiety that it recently conducted a major study on the phenomenon. It found that visitors to medical Internet websites do, indeed, show a pattern of thinking the worst. Evidence: the vast majority of headache sufferers jump from that topic directly to brain tumors rather than to more benign interpretations such as eye strain or fatigue.

A related study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project recently found that 80 percent of American Internet users have searched for health information on their computers. Among this group, only 25 percent checked the results for accuracy. Once disfiguring melanoma appears on the computer screen, almost no one believes the bump on the bridge of the nose is only a pimple.

Obviously, people who constantly think they're dying create a major strain on society, especially employers. It's difficult to cut slack for a person who lurches weekly from one bout of malaria to another, missing endless amount of work. Spouses don't much like serious bed-hugging, either. If you have multiple afflictions, therefore, I strongly suggest that, rather than use all your sick days through 2020 and ruin your family life, you try to get a grip on your fertile imagination. Here are some ideas:

Use your common sense. When my so-called mind jumps from having a slight tummy ache to suffering from a food-born poisoning with no known antidote, I hazard a guess that I'm perfectly healthy. You probably are, too. My advice is to ignore your suspected ruptured spleen, climb out of your deathbed, and trudge merrily along.



Dr. Kathleen A. Begley
The Write Woman
KBegley@writecompanyplus.com
610-429-1562

Search only respected medical sites. I recommend anything containing the letters NIH, for National Institute for Health. If you run across a website called www.kathleenbegley.com, immediately hit the exit button. She's a quack.

See an actual doctor. Sure, they charge an arm and a leg, that is if your cyberchondria hasn't already persuaded you to ask a surgeon for amputations. But doctors have unique experience with imagined illness. Dr. Eric Horvitz, part of the team on the Microsoft study, recalls a time in his early 20's when he was convinced he suffered from a rare and incurable disease. So he went for a checkup. When his physician temporarily stepped out of the room, Horvitz sneaked a peak at his medical chart to read his diagnosis. It said: "Eric is in medical school, and he has been reading a lot."

Ask questions. If your Internet search has made you feel as if you better put your affairs in order, bring up these concerns to medical experts. Most doctors will be able to tell you, for example, that shaking hands often means that you have drunk too much coffee – not that you're in the early stages of Parkinson's Disease.

Broaden your use of medical websites. By far, most Internet users tap into the web to determine what ails them. Instead, why not take advantage of the millions of pro-active health tips on your computer? One example: WebMD.com just added a healthy nutrition section, designed to ward off diseases rather than raise your blood pressure obsessing about them.

Make fun of yourself. Be honest now. What are the chances that you could have contracted Lou Gehrig's Disease, diabetes, and esophageal cancer in the space of five minutes? Only my body is capable of that much rapid deterioration.

Contact me. Having switched from low-tech hypochondria to high-tech cyberchondria, I am an expert in imaginary sicknesses. If you tell me you woke up today with pains in your two pinkie fingers, I can instantaneously convert that information into crippling and painful rheumatoid arthritis. That's the beauty of the Internet. Another cyberchondriac advantage of constantly surfing for medical data: you often run across additional sources of information. Among them are printed materials promoted by amazon.com and the e-tail versions of Borders and Barnes & Noble. Just yesterday, for example, I happened upon and then ordered what I suspect may turn out to be the best book I have ever read: "The Complete Manual of Things That Can Kill You."

Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. Her new blog "Meandering to a Different Drummer" is available by clicking the icon on the lower right of her homepage at www.writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody. If you feel you've become too busy to ever read this free, opt-in blogletter, please tell us to remove you from our mailing list. Although our feelings will be hurt, we'll cheerfully delete you.