

**STEPS primary care mental health team, Glasgow**

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# **Health Anxiety**

**Anne Joice**

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We all worry about our health at times. Some people who have aches and pains worry that this might be a sign of serious illness. This can make the aches and pains worse. This booklet aims to teach people other ways of coping with such problems.

### **PART 1: Finding out about health anxiety**

- What is health anxiety?
- What keep health anxiety going?

### **PART 2: Dealing with health worries**

- Find other reasons for feelings in your body and aches and pains
- How to come to terms with being unsure about illness
- Things that are helpful
- Stop the vicious circle
- Learn not to ask for comfort support form others about your aches and pains
- Stop looking for and checking feeling in your body
- Stop finding out about illness
- Stop acting as if you are ill
- Stop avoiding things to do with illness
- Dealing with the worries about your health

## **PART 1**

### **Finding out about health anxiety**

## **What is health anxiety?**

**Here are some of the ways people talk about health anxiety:**

**Jim is 55 years old and is off work as an Insurance Salesman; he had a heart attack and is now worried about his health.**

"I get pains in my chest and I think I am going to have a heart attack. I have been to see my doctor and he has done some tests and told me that my heart is OK. When I get the pains in my chest I stop doing the things I am doing and take a rest. I have stopped going out and have to plan what I do. Sometimes I have to stay in all day because I can't manage the stairs."

**Sarah is 23 years old and works at the front desk at a local sports centre.**

"I get really bad headaches and get worried that I might have a brain tumour. My gran died from a brain tumour that no-one knew she had. I think 'what if that happens to me'. When I think about this I feel butterflies in my tummy, and get sweaty and shaky. I look to my doctor and friends for comfort but it doesn't make me feel any better when they tell me not to worry."

**Jean 42 years old and is a housewife**

"I suffer from multiple sclerosis and worry about my health a lot. I am scared that one day I will wake up and the tingling in my arm will be worse and I won't be able to do anything again. It is the first thing I think about when I waken up. "

**John is 59 years old and is a taxi driver**

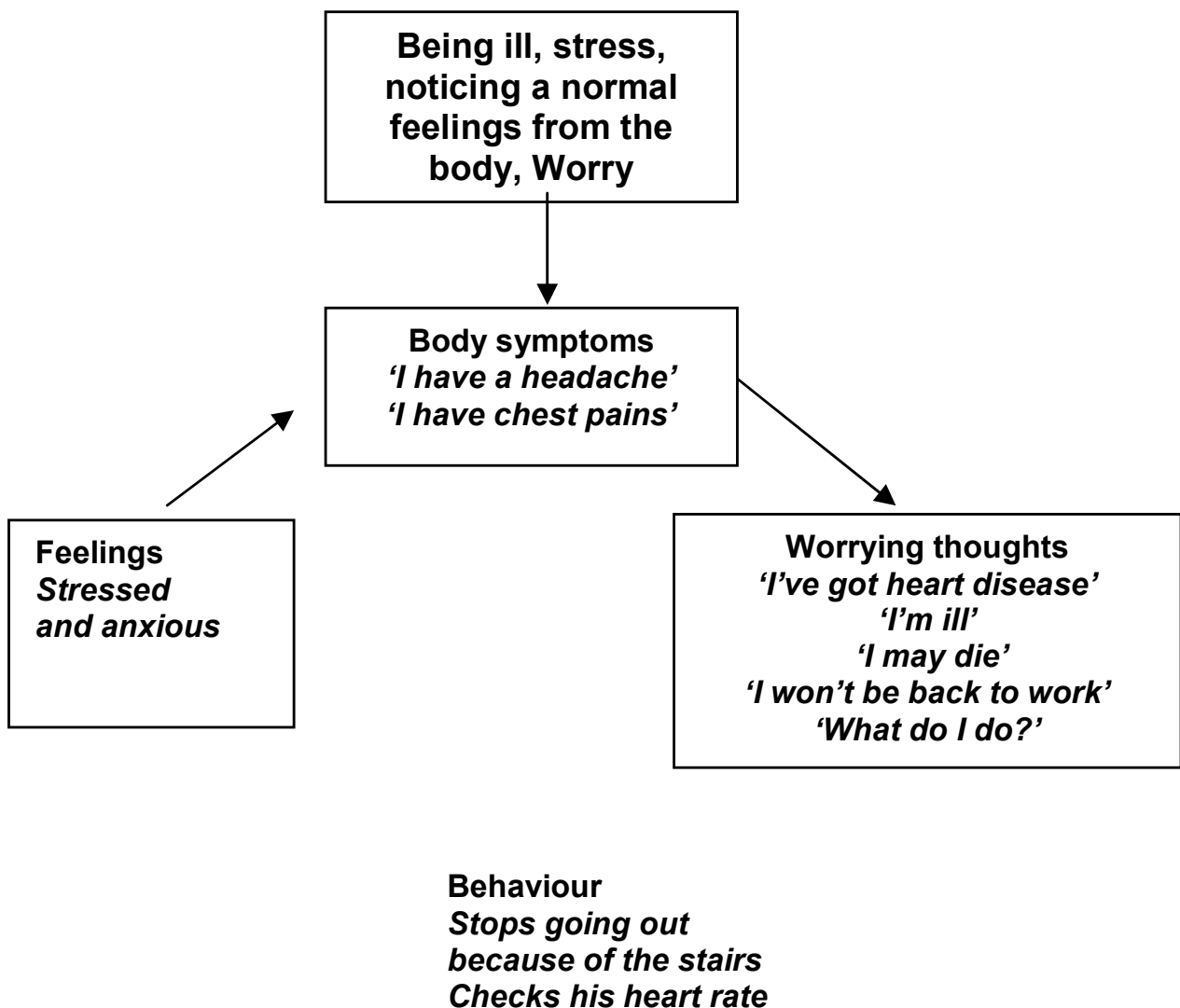
"I have a bad back which gets worse at work because of the job I do. I have spent a lot of time finding out about back problems and have read lots of books. I have a physio who gives me exercises that are really painful so I don't do them very often – I prefer to have a massage"

**IMPORTANT:**

There are things that people do that keep their problems going. Things like – avoiding doing things, looking for comfort, checking for symptoms and focusing on your illness do not help

## What keeps health anxiety going?

People with health anxiety worry that the body symptoms they have might be signs of a serious illness. Worrying can make the symptoms worse. It can lead to what we call the vicious circle of worry. The way you cope with the worry can sometimes feed the vicious circle. Jim is worried about having another heart attack. He notices his heart rate and is more aware than ever before of any change. He tries to keep his heart rate down by stopping exercise. It is normal to have concerns after a heart attack but Jim needs to be careful that he does not make things worse.



## Ways of coping that don't help

<b>Seeking comfort:</b>	If we worry about our health all the time we sometimes like to ask if things are OK. Usually we hear that they are. But this comfort does not last and the worry comes back, it will be worse if we notice the symptoms again. Seeking comfort only makes us feel better in the short term, but makes it worse in the long term. This is because thinking about your symptoms means you will notice more symptoms. Then you tend not to believe the comfort and support you got. You may then want to look for more comfort
<b>Monitoring and checking physical symptoms:</b>	Being aware of body symptoms tends to make us check for more symptoms and become more aware of them. But our bodies change over the day and this is OK. If we are looking for changes we will find them and sometimes this makes us feel more worried about our symptoms
<b>Finding out about illness:</b>	It is a good idea to find out about illness. If you pay too much attention to it you might start to notice other changes in your body that are not signs of illness at all. You might then worry that your health is getting worse.
<b>Acting as though you are ill</b>	Trying to look after yourself may result in you behaving as though you were ill and you are likely to become less fit and so have more symptoms
<b>When you avoid things to do with illness</b>	If we avoid things to do with illness, the fears sometimes keep going. They build up and get out of control.

## **PART 2**

### **Dealing with health worries**

The next section of this booklet looks at changing old ways of coping. You will learn new ways of coping with your anxiety about health.

In part one we looked at how your symptoms are kept going with the vicious circle of worry. In part two we learn the things we can do that will stop the vicious circle.

### 1) Find other reasons for your symptoms

The symptoms you have could be due to a serious illness, yet it is likely that they are not. Many symptoms are caused by changes in your body that are normal, not dangerous. They are not signs of any bigger problems.

Worry can produce all sorts of body symptoms which can make you feel bad or upset. They do not always mean you are ill.

<b>Finding other reasons for the symptoms</b>	
Write down all the reasons why you think you are ill. Then ask <i>'can these be caused by something else'</i>	
e.g. Reasons that I think I have a brain tumour	Reasons against having a brain tumour
<i>I have a bad headache</i>	<p><i>I am very stressed at the moment</i></p> <p><i>If I lie down and the pain goes away it is unlikely to be a brain tumour</i></p> <p><i>Brain tumours are very rare</i></p> <p><i>I have had bad headaches for years and I'm still alive</i></p>

## **2) How to come to terms with doubts about your health**

We may all become ill at some time in our lives. This is a fact for most of us, but we can decide whether we want to spend our time worrying about this possibility or get on with our lives

**Write down your answers to these questions. It may help to talk them over with someone else.**

**What are my worries about my health?**, e.g. ‘ I am worried that I am having a heart attack’, ‘I am worried that I will not be able to look after the family

**Do I know for certain that I have this illness**, e.g. because the doctor has told me so

- If yes – then follow your doctors advice
- If no – because you are uncertain or know for sure that you do not have the illness, then ask yourself the following question....

**Is there anything I can do about my worry?** – for example, change my diet or lifestyle

- If yes – then do it now
- If no – then stop worrying ( and see section on dealing with worries)

### 3) Things that are helpful.

Make a list of the things you have done to try and help yourself. Think about how helpful they are in stopping your worry. Give each a rating between 0 – 10 for how helpful it was for you at the time. Now as a second rating of how helpful it was to you in the long-term (with 0 being not at all helpful, while 10 is very helpful)

<b>Ways I have tackled my worry about my health</b>	<b>How helpful was it at the time</b>	<b>How helpful was it in the long-term</b>
Going to the doctor	6	0
Having tests	8	0
Talking about my symptoms to my husband	10	2
Staying in bed and having a good rest	5	1
Trying to avoid health programmes	4	2
Stop thinking about the way my body feels all the time	3	6

#### 4) Stop the vicious circle of worry

##### A. Learn not to ask for comfort and support

When looking for comfort from others you tend to think more about your health and tend not to believe what people say. It is more helpful if you can comfort yourself.

Every time you feel very worried about your health, try not to ask for help from anyone else. For example, do not ask your partner or family about your health. If you do, ask them to help you by not 'comforting' you. They could change the subject if you start talking about the state of your health. This may make you feel worried in the short-term. Instead try and find another way of coping with the worry. One very good way is to take your mind off your worries by doing something else. Go for a walk, clean the house, do a hobby you enjoy, or read. Find something that works for you so that you. Try to keep yourself busy with something else when you are tempted to talk and worry about your health

*Sarah kept a record of how many times she asked for comfort about her headaches. She found it helpful. She found that when she was not given comfort, she felt bad in the short term. As she started to find her own ways to comfort herself she noticed that she began to feel better and asked for it less often. She also found that she worried less often.*

	<b>Mon</b>	<b>Tues</b>	<b>Wed</b>	<b>Thurs</b>	<b>Fri</b>
Number of times I asked for comfort	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>
How worried I felt ( 0 – 10)	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>

## **B Stop watching and checking your symptoms**

It is a great idea to carry out simple checks on your health every so often e.g. checking your breasts once a month. It is not helpful to think about your health all the time. Worrying about your health can make you aware of every tiny symptom. This is like putting a spotlight on your body all the time. Checking maintains the problem. It keeps your attention focused on your body. It makes you more anxious. Poking and squeezing can increase the symptoms. You need to turn the spotlight off your body

Decide how much checking is OK. You can find out by asking your doctor, family and friends

If you are tempted to check: **DON'T !!!!!** Not checking is likely to make you worried in the short-term. You can cope with the worry by taking your mind off it. Try to distract yourself. Try the other ways of coping with worrying thoughts that are on page 20

You may need to practice not checking: it is a bit like stopping a bad habit. Ask your family to help you to stop, or help take your mind off every symptom

## C Stop finding out about illness

Sometimes knowing too much about health can be a bad thing. It makes you very aware of every change in your body. Much of what you find out may seem very vague. Lots of things can cause a change in your body. Trying to find out if you have an illness can be very worrying and not helpful at all.

**Try** to stop finding out so much about illness. Stop reading medical books. Stop watching every single medical programme.

**Even** if you are very tempted to read up on every single thing, try not to do so. This may make you worried in the short-term, but not in the long-term

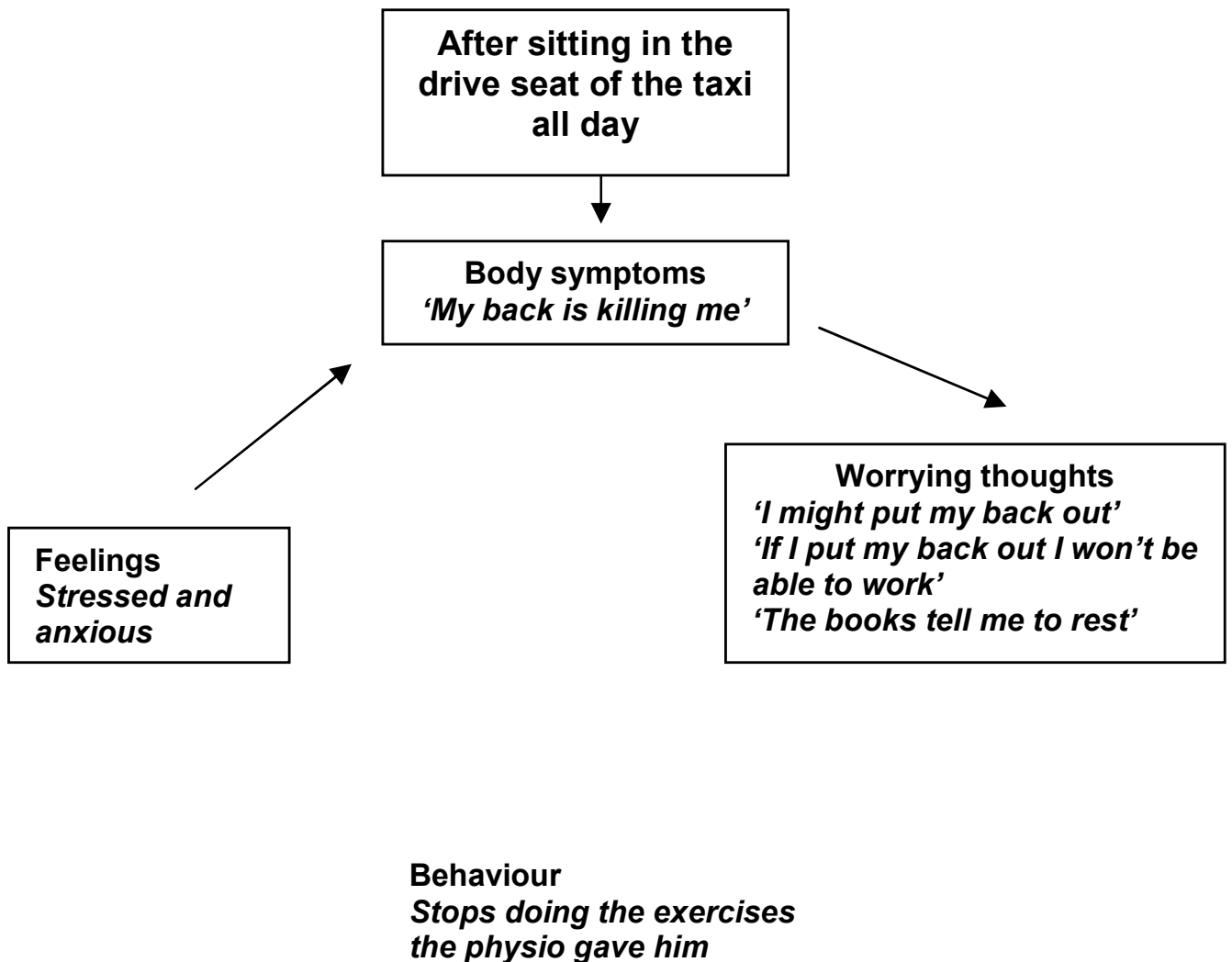
**Distract** yourself or try other ways of coping with worries

**Ask** your family to help you not to keep on reading up about symptoms and watch less worrying programmes on TV. Continue until you are able to cope better with the worries

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Number of times I found out about illness							
How worried I felt (0 – 10)							

## D Stop behaving as though you are ill

Many people who are worried about their health stop doing things e.g. they stop doing things, because they are worried about hurting themselves. The trouble with stopping doing things is that you will become less fit. If you are less fit, then you may become tired, or generally unwell. You may then start to think these signs are signs of illness. Then you might slow down even more, and so on in another vicious circle. Here is John's vicious circle about his bad back.



## Plan to get active

<p>It is important that you resume your normal level of activities slowly. If you have been inactive for a while, don't expect to be able to do as much as you used to do at once</p>	
<p><b>Make</b> a list of all the things you used to do, and would like to do again. Put them in order – with the one using the least amount of effort first, and finish with the one that needs most effort.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>☐</li><li>☐</li><li>☐</li><li>☐</li><li>☐</li><li>☐</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>☐</li><li>☐</li><li>☐</li><li>☐</li><li>☐</li><li>☐</li></ul>
<p>Each day, spend a little time, gently doing first step on your list. For example, this may be going for a walk, for 5 minutes, without pushing yourself. When you can perform this and not feel too tired, extend the length of your walk.</p>	
<p>When you can do the first step well (such as walking for half an hour) move on to the next step. Be careful never to push yourself too hard.</p>	
<p>Work through your list step by step.</p>	

Jim made a list of the things he used to do. He wanted to get back to golf. Here is his list.

<b>Jim's plan to get active</b>	
☐ <i>Do physio's exercises for 5 minutes each night</i>	✓
☐ <i>Do physio's exercises for 10 minutes each night</i>	✓
☐ <i>Do physio's exercises for 10 minutes each night and go for short walk for 5 mins</i>	✓ ✓
☐ <i>Do physio's exercises for 10 minutes each night and go for short walk for 10 mins</i>	☐ ☐
☐ <i>Do physio's exercises for 10 minutes each night and go for short walk for 20 mins</i>	☐
☐ <i>Practice golf swing.</i>	
☐ <i>Practice golf swing and go for walk for 20 mins</i>	

## **E Stop avoiding things to do with illness**

You may avoid finding out about health because it makes you very upset. When you avoid doing this it may make you feel better in the short –term, but more worries in the long-term.

Make a list of the ways in which you have been avoiding things to do with the illness you worry about. Rate each for how much you avoid them, on a scale of 0 – 10 (where 0 is least and 10 the most). Then start with the one you avoid least. Plan to spend a bit of time doing just this. You will slowly be able to tackle each in turn. Here is Sarah’s list for

<b>What I have avoided</b>	<b>How much I avoided it</b>
<i>Watching TV programme on heart disease</i>	10
<i>Listening to other people talking about their illness</i>	5
<i>Reading about heart disease in the paper</i>	7

## **F Dealing with the worries about your health**

When you worry, the thoughts are of a certain type. They tend to overplay how likely it is that something bad will happen. They tend to underplay how well we can cope with it. You need to get worrying about your health into more balance.

Sarah found keeping a diary of her thoughts and other possible thoughts was helpful.

Here is Sarah's diary:

## Step 1 - What are your worrying thoughts?

<b>Write down your worrying thoughts.</b>	<b>How much do I believe it?</b>	
<i>My headache means I have a brain tumour.</i>	10	

## Step 2 - Challenge your worrying thoughts

**Try and find a more balanced thought.**

**Ask yourself what reasons you have for the thought.**

**Ask yourself what reasons you have against the thought.**

It might help if you think of:

- What would you say to yourself if you were not feeling so worried? What might you say to someone else if they said this to you?
- What might your partner or friend say to you about your worries?
- What could you say to yourself that is more helpful and less worrying?

*My gran had headaches and she died of a brain tumour.*

*I have had tests done and I am OK.*

*Lots of people have headaches and don't have brain tumours.*

*I have a stressful job that can give people headaches.*

## Step 3 - Come up with another way of looking at it

<b>More balanced thought</b>	<b>New rating of worry (0–10)</b>	
<i>Brain tumours are rare in adults. I am aware of it because it's in the news</i>	3	

## How did everyone get on?

**Jim** is still a bit worried that he might have a heart attack. He used the get active checklist and is now doing a bit more about the house. He is able to go out to the local shops. He is still trying to slowly do more things and thinks he might be able to go back to work.

*"It can be hard coming up with the right things on my plan – some things seem really easy and other things too scar. I have found it a very useful thing to do."*

**Sarah** is more aware of how stressful her job is. She used the 'Things that are helpful checklist' to come up with some things that she can do to cut back on the stress in her life. An example of this is making sure that she takes all her breaks away from her desk. She also used the record to check how often she looked for comfort and how it made her feel. She also used the step-by-step checklist for dealing with worrying thoughts

*"It feels good when people tell me I am OK – but I never really believe them. I know now that it's just another way of thinking about my health in a bad way. I thought about the reason for and against my worrying thought. I try to say to myself – what would my best friend Julie say if I said this to her. This works"*

**Jean** knows that she will have worrying thoughts about her health. She has to try not to let them snowball. She used the Step-by-step checklist for worrying thoughts and came up with another way of looking at her symptoms which works for her

*"I don't have to go looking for signs I am ill. Sometimes the things I feel are just the way I have been lying at night."*

**John** is halfway through his plan of action to get back to golf. He has noticed that doing the physio's exercises often has made his back stronger and his back is not always as sore after work.

*"Doing the exercises has really helped me – above all when I plan what I am going to do. I still like to have a massage now and again!"*

**Trying to focus on something else can be useful. If you worry less, your symptoms will also get less**

There are 3 ways in which you can distract yourself when you notice that you are beginning to worry:

**Do something.** This might include keep fit e.g. going for a walk, swim, or digging the garden. Reading a book, cooking or listening to the radio can also help

**Pay attention to something else.** Notice what is around you, in the room or outside. You could count how many red objects you can see. You could describe a picture in great detail. The more detailed the task, the more it will distract you.

**Do a mental exercise** such as sums in your head. For example, count backward in sevens from 3496. Or you could think of a holiday you have had or think of a special place. Think about the sounds, smells and textures as well as the sights

**There are other ways of dealing with your health worries:**

You could tell yourself that you will worry at a certain time in the day. This means that you can tell yourself you do not need to worry now because you can do it later.

You can also imagine that you are putting the worries into a box. When the box is full, you can imagine throwing it away.

**Fight the vicious circle of health anxiety all the way.**

**Rule it - don't let it rule you.**

## **Tackling other problems**

Many people find that having a problem with health anxiety is only one problem among others. If you feel you would like to tackle problems such as stress, anxiety, depression, poor sleep, alcohol, depression, low self-confidence, etc., then STEPS might be able to help.

Ask at your GP practice for more information or take a look at our web site ([www.glasgowsteps.com](http://www.glasgowsteps.com)) to find out more.