Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

The Doctor Says "Monitor It," and I Monitor Myself Every Seven Minutes

How to Get Through the Wait for a Diagnosis, Record Symptoms That Matter, and Agree on Next Steps Without Keeping a 24/7 Watch on Every Signal From Your Body



We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

The Doctor Says “Monitor It,” and I Monitor Myself Every Seven Minutes

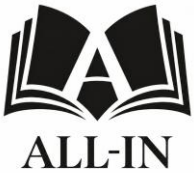
How to Get Through the Wait for a Diagnosis, Record Symptoms That Matter, and Agree on Next Steps Without Keeping a 24/7 Watch on Every Signal From Your Body

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ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



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INTRO

It is 8:23 on a perfectly ordinary Wednesday morning, and you are standing in front of the bathroom mirror trying to decide whether your neck looks different from yesterday. You tilt your head left, then right. You inspect the lighting. You consider taking a photograph, but yesterday's photograph was taken in the kitchen, where the light is warmer, so the comparison would hardly meet acceptable scientific standards. Your doctor said to monitor a symptom while waiting for further evaluation. Sensible advice, surely. Except nobody mentioned that you might interpret "monitor" as an invitation to become the unpaid director of a private medical surveillance agency. You haven't even had breakfast, and already your neck has undergone three inspections, two preliminary assessments, and an informal disciplinary hearing.

The peculiar thing about waiting for a diagnosis is that the uncertainty can become almost as disruptive as the symptom itself. Perhaps you've had an examination, some tests have been ordered, or your doctor wants to see how a particular problem develops before deciding what to do next. There may be perfectly reasonable medical grounds for that approach. Not every symptom leads to an immediate diagnosis, and not every unanswered question requires another test that afternoon. But understanding this intellectually doesn't necessarily make the waiting comfortable. You leave the appointment knowing that something is being investigated, yet without knowing what the outcome will be. Your mind, which apparently considers unanswered questions a personal insult, begins working overtime to produce explanations nobody has requested.

At first, you tell yourself you're simply being responsible. You pay closer attention to your body, notice small changes, and try to remember exactly when particular sensations occur. Unfortunately, the human body is not a silent machine that announces itself only when something is wrong. It produces all sorts of ordinary sensations throughout the day. Muscles tighten, stomachs make noises, skin itches, and breathing changes with activity and emotion. Some symptoms deserve medical attention, while others may be less significant. Determining which is which requires appropriate context and, when needed, professional assessment. Concentrating intensely on a sensation can make you more aware of it, but increased awareness doesn't automatically reveal its cause. You may simply discover that your body has been conducting a remarkably noisy internal operation without seeking your permission.

Then comes the checking. You feel something unfamiliar, inspect it, and experience a moment of relief. Perhaps nothing has changed. Excellent. Unfortunately, relief has a rather inconvenient expiration date. Twenty minutes later, you wonder whether the situation might have changed since the last inspection. You check again. This time you're less certain about what you're seeing, so you compare it with an earlier photograph. Now the photographs look different, although you cannot tell whether the difference belongs to your body or the camera. What began as an attempt to obtain useful information has become a repeating cycle of uncertainty, checking, and temporary reassurance. The uncomfortable part is that every additional inspection feels responsible, even when it isn't providing anything new.

Technology can make this experience considerably more elaborate. A search engine is always available, health

discussions never close, and an impressive variety of devices will happily produce numbers for you to contemplate. Some of these resources have legitimate uses. The trouble begins when you ask them questions they cannot answer. A website can explain what a medical term means, but it cannot determine the cause of your symptoms from a handful of keywords. A dramatic account of somebody else's diagnosis may be entirely genuine without being representative of your circumstances. And a measurement, however beautifully displayed, is not automatically meaningful outside its proper medical context. Unfortunately, the internet is exceptionally good at presenting possibilities and rather less talented at knowing when you've had enough possibilities for one evening.

Meanwhile, ordinary life continues making unreasonable demands. Your employer still expects you to attend meetings. The laundry has developed its own independent schedule. Someone wants to make weekend plans, and you can't decide whether agreeing would be recklessly optimistic. You may also be dealing with pain, fatigue, financial pressures, caring responsibilities, or difficulty getting appointments. Being told to relax doesn't make those circumstances disappear. Nor is it particularly helpful when the person offering that advice follows it immediately with an alarming story about a distant relative. The challenge isn't simply to think more positively. It's to manage genuine health concerns and genuine uncertainty without allowing them to consume every available hour.

That is where this book comes in. We are going to make a useful distinction between paying attention to your health and endlessly investigating yourself. Proper symptom monitoring has a purpose. It gathers information relevant to

medical decisions, follows an appropriate schedule when one is needed, and identifies changes that should prompt further contact. Endless checking, by contrast, may generate an enormous quantity of observations without improving your understanding. You'll learn how to make notes that actually help describe a symptom's course, including its timing, circumstances, and effect on daily functioning when those details are relevant. The goal is not to produce a medical encyclopedia starring yourself. It's to make the next clinical conversation more informative.

We'll also deal with a surprisingly neglected skill: asking what the plan actually is. "Keep an eye on it" can be reasonable advice, but it needs enough explanation to become something you can follow. What specifically should you notice? Is there an agreed follow-up date? What changes should lead you to contact a clinician sooner? Who will review the results of any tests, and how will you hear about the next decision? You should not have to invent medical thresholds or diagnose yourself in order to follow instructions. A useful plan makes responsibilities clearer while acknowledging that some questions cannot yet be answered. It won't necessarily eliminate uncertainty, but it can remove a great deal of unnecessary guesswork.

There will also be moments when the results look reassuring but you still feel unwell, when two professional opinions differ, or when another appointment seems impossible to fit around work and family responsibilities. Those situations deserve more than a cheerful instruction to stay calm. Sometimes the appropriate response is to ask for clarification, reconsider the existing plan with a clinician, or seek an additional assessment. Sometimes the difficulty lies in the compulsive search for certainty rather than a new

medical development. Often the two experiences overlap. We will approach them without pretending that persistent physical symptoms are imaginary or that anxiety automatically indicates a serious disease. Both health and emotional well-being deserve thoughtful attention.

One boundary matters throughout: this is not a substitute for medical evaluation, diagnosis, or treatment. New, worsening, or concerning symptoms may require professional assessment, and sudden severe problems such as significant difficulty breathing, severe chest pain, or signs of a stroke require emergency care. The appropriate warning signs and monitoring instructions depend on your particular medical situation. A technique for reducing unnecessary checking must never become an excuse to delay needed help. Likewise, if fear about your health is seriously affecting sleep, relationships, or everyday functioning, support from a qualified mental health professional may be valuable alongside medical care. You do not have to choose which kind of suffering deserves attention.

I cannot promise that every unanswered medical question will eventually receive a neat explanation, complete with a reassuring signature at the bottom. Some diagnostic journeys are complicated, and some conditions require ongoing care. What you can develop is a more sustainable way to participate in that process: communicating clearly, following meaningful instructions, recognizing when action is needed, and making room for life between appointments. You may still feel afraid at times. You may still dislike waiting. Neither experience means you have failed at looking after yourself. Responsible care does not require perfect

composure, unlimited time, or the ability to anticipate every possible development.

So imagine another Wednesday morning. Your follow-up appointment is on the calendar, your relevant questions are ready, and you understand what changes would require earlier medical attention. You notice an ordinary sensation without automatically turning it into a personal investigation. You make breakfast, answer a message, and get on with whatever the day holds, within your actual health limitations. There is no dramatic announcement that uncertainty has been defeated. You simply no longer need to spend every waking minute trying to defeat it. Your body still deserves proper care, and you remain entitled to answers and appropriate medical attention. But you are also entitled to a life that contains something other than waiting for them.

The doctor said, "Monitor it." Fair enough. Let's make sure that means sensible observation, not a lifetime appointment as the night-shift security guard of your own anatomy.

Chapter 1 - "Keep an Eye on It": The Medical Instruction That Came Without a Manual

The appointment is over. Your doctor has examined you, asked several questions, and explained that there isn't enough information to reach a definite conclusion yet. Then comes the instruction: "Keep an eye on it." You nod because this sounds perfectly reasonable when delivered by someone wearing a stethoscope. Only later, while standing in the pharmacy queue, do you realise that you have absolutely no idea what you've agreed to do. How closely should you watch? What counts as a change? Are you supposed to check every morning, whenever you remember, or whenever your imagination announces an emergency? The instruction sounded professional, but its practical details appear to have been supplied separately. Unfortunately, the separate package was never delivered.

There are legitimate reasons for monitoring a symptom rather than immediately pursuing every possible investigation. Some problems need time to reveal a pattern. Sometimes the findings from an examination are reassuring enough to support a period of observation, provided appropriate follow-up and safety instructions are in place. In other circumstances, a clinician may be waiting for further information before choosing among possible treatments or tests. Monitoring can therefore be an active part of medical care, even when it looks suspiciously like waiting. The difficulty is that an instruction can be medically reasonable and still be too vague for the person expected to follow it. A clinician may understand exactly what matters, while the

patient hears an invitation to supervise the entire human body.

Imagine Daniel, who has experienced occasional stiffness in two fingers. His clinician assesses the problem, discusses possible next steps, and recommends observing how the symptoms develop before a scheduled review. Daniel leaves intending to be an exceptionally responsible patient. At breakfast the following morning, he opens and closes his hand repeatedly. At work, he checks whether the fingers move differently after typing. During dinner, he compares his left and right hands, even though the original concern involved only one. By bedtime, he has performed more finger inspections than a concert pianist preparing for an unusually hostile audition. Yet he still cannot confidently explain whether the original stiffness has changed. His observations have multiplied without becoming particularly informative.

Daniel's difficulty illustrates a distinction worth understanding early: useful monitoring is selective. It concentrates on information relevant to a particular medical question. Indiscriminate surveillance collects whatever happens to attract attention. These are not interchangeable activities. The first may help a clinician understand the course of a problem. The second can create an impressive collection of sensations, many of which have no clear relationship to the original concern. Your body produces an enormous range of ordinary experiences throughout the day. If you inspect enough of them, you will undoubtedly discover variations. The challenge is knowing which variations deserve attention in your particular circumstances.

Give the instruction a job description

A useful monitoring instruction starts with identifying the feature being monitored. "Watch your symptoms" is less informative than an explanation of which symptoms, changes, or effects on daily functioning matter. A clinician might be interested in frequency, duration, severity, circumstances, or additional symptoms, depending on the problem. There is no universally correct selection. Someone monitoring an intermittent symptom may need different information from someone following a prescribed measurement schedule. This is why borrowing another patient's monitoring routine is unreliable. Their instructions may be entirely appropriate for their condition and completely inappropriate for yours. Medical plans aren't interchangeable accessories, however attractive the packaging.

Daniel's clinician might want to know whether the finger stiffness is becoming more frequent, interfering with ordinary tasks, or accompanied by particular changes. Those details would need to be established during his consultation rather than guessed afterward. If he understands the relevant features, he can pay attention to the intended problem without repeatedly testing every movement his hand is capable of performing. The distinction matters because repeated self-testing can change the experience being observed. If you keep bending, pressing, stretching, or provoking an area to see whether something happens, you may create additional discomfort or make the original pattern harder to interpret. Testing your own body is not automatically equivalent to clinical assessment.

Frequency is another missing piece in many monitoring instructions. Does your clinician want scheduled measurements, notes when episodes occur, or a general

account at the next appointment? Those approaches serve different purposes. Some medical conditions genuinely require regular measurements using an agreed method. Other situations may not benefit from frequent checking at all. Increasing the frequency on your own doesn't necessarily improve safety or the usefulness of the information. It can produce more numbers without answering the clinical question. Before inventing a complicated schedule, ask what level of observation is appropriate. The goal is to perform the monitoring that is needed, not to demonstrate extraordinary dedication through the sheer number of entries.

Then there is duration. Monitoring until when? A planned review appointment, receipt of a test result, a change in symptoms, or another explicitly agreed point? Without an endpoint or review arrangement, people can find themselves monitoring indefinitely because nobody has clearly explained when the information will be evaluated. A review date doesn't guarantee that the problem will be resolved by then, but it gives the observation a place within the wider care plan. If the next step depends on the course of the symptoms, ask how and when that decision will be made. Otherwise, "keep an eye on it" can quietly become a lifelong subscription that nobody remembers signing up for.

The most important clarification concerns what should happen if the situation changes. A monitoring plan needs appropriate safety instructions: which developments justify contacting the clinician sooner, and which require urgent medical attention. These depend on your particular symptoms, medical history, medications, and clinical assessment. You cannot safely create universal thresholds from a book or a collection of internet anecdotes. Sudden

severe symptoms such as significant breathing difficulty, severe chest pain, or signs of a stroke require emergency medical care rather than continued home observation. For other concerns, the correct urgency varies. Ask your clinician to explain relevant warning signs and what route to use if they appear.

The appointment is not your only chance to understand

Many people leave an appointment with unanswered questions because they assume asking for clarification would be irritating or embarrassing. Perhaps the clinician seemed busy. Perhaps you understood the words individually but not what you were supposed to do with them. You may even have said "That makes sense" while privately wondering what, exactly, made sense. Medical discussions often contain unfamiliar terminology, and anxiety can make information harder to retain. You are not required to become fluent in clinical language during a short consultation. You do, however, need instructions you can understand well enough to follow.

A practical question might be: "When you say I should monitor this, which changes are important, and what would you like me to report?" If the answer remains broad, you can ask whether there should be a particular frequency of observation or a planned review. You might also say, "What should I do if things change before our next appointment?" These questions do not challenge the clinician's authority or demand an immediate diagnosis. They clarify the work being requested of you. Sometimes a brief exchange is enough to turn an ambiguous instruction into a sensible agreement.

It can also help to repeat the plan in your own words before leaving. For example: "So I should follow these instructions, contact the practice if the changes you've

described occur, and attend the review we've arranged. Have I understood correctly?" This gives the clinician an opportunity to correct a misunderstanding. The technique is particularly useful when several instructions have been given together. You might remember the test but forget who will review the result, or recall the follow-up date without understanding what should prompt earlier contact. Confirming the sequence is not being difficult. It is considerably less difficult than spending the following weekend attempting to reconstruct the conversation from memory.

What if you realise only afterward that the instructions are incomplete? Contact the healthcare practice or service through an appropriate channel and explain the specific uncertainty. Administrative staff may be able to arrange a message or appointment, although they should not be expected to make clinical decisions outside their responsibilities. If your condition worsens or requires urgent assessment, seek suitable medical help rather than waiting for an administrative clarification. Healthcare systems differ in their arrangements, so it is worth understanding which service can provide advice outside normal office hours. A plan that depends on reaching a particular office on a Tuesday morning is incomplete if it gives you no guidance for an important change on Saturday night.

Make monitoring fit the purpose, not the other way around

Once the necessary instructions are clear, the information you collect should remain proportionate to the task. A brief description of a significant episode may be more useful than pages of uncertain sensations. Daniel, for example, might be asked to record when the stiffness occurs, how long it lasts,

and whether it affects particular activities. If those details are clinically relevant, he can capture them without checking his hand every time he notices it exists. He doesn't need to turn the kitchen table into a finger-testing facility or compare yesterday's movements with an elaborate personal grading system.

It is equally important to distinguish observation from interpretation. "I found it harder to hold a pen this morning" describes an experience. "My condition is definitely progressing" is a conclusion that may not follow from that experience alone. Both your observations and your concerns can be discussed with a clinician, but they should not be mistaken for the same kind of information. If you are uncertain about an episode's timing or intensity, say so rather than manufacturing precision. An approximate, honest account is generally more useful than an impressive-looking number invented because your notebook seemed to expect one.

Monitoring can become emotionally exhausting when every observation feels like a test of whether you are being a good patient. You may worry that missing a detail will prevent a diagnosis or that failing to check often enough means you are neglecting your health. These beliefs can create responsibilities no clinician actually assigned. If monitoring itself is consuming substantial time or increasing distress, discuss that difficulty with the person responsible for your care. It may be possible to clarify or adjust the approach while preserving clinically necessary information. Do not independently discontinue monitoring that has been specifically prescribed, but don't assume that additional surveillance is automatically beneficial.

Real life also affects what you can reasonably record. Someone working long shifts, caring for relatives, or coping with fatigue may struggle with an elaborate schedule. When instructions are difficult to implement, explain the obstacle rather than silently abandoning the plan or pretending to follow it perfectly. Sometimes a clinician can identify a simpler approach that still meets the medical purpose. In other circumstances, particular measurements or timing requirements are important and cannot safely be changed. The solution depends on the situation, which is precisely why open communication matters more than producing an immaculate tracking spreadsheet.

Daniel eventually understands that his assignment is not to supervise every movement of his fingers. He needs to follow the agreed instructions, notice specified developments, and make the information available for appropriate review. The uncertainty surrounding his symptoms may remain, and further assessment may still be necessary. But the monitoring itself becomes less mysterious. He can distinguish an observation worth reporting from another attempt to reassure himself by repeating a movement. He has not acquired specialist knowledge overnight. He has acquired something more practical: a clear understanding of what is expected of him.

Good monitoring should support decisions. It should not become a performance in which you earn imaginary points for enthusiasm, sacrifice, and unusually detailed descriptions of ordinary bodily sensations. A clinician's instruction deserves to be taken seriously, but taking it seriously includes understanding its limits. If you know what matters, when to report it, and how the next decision will be made, you have a workable role in your care. You can

perform that role without appointing yourself permanent supervisor of every organ you possess.

After all, "keep an eye on it" should come with a reasonable job description. It should not require you to grow an additional pair of eyes just to keep up with the workload.

Chapter 2 - The Body Detective Who Started Investigating Everything

At 2:16 in the afternoon, you become aware of your breathing. This would not ordinarily qualify as news. You have, after all, been breathing for quite some time without requiring a written operating procedure. But today you're waiting for further medical evaluation, and your mind has become unusually interested in anything happening inside your body. You notice one breath feels deeper than the previous one. Then you wonder whether the next breath will feel normal. You try to breathe naturally, which immediately makes natural breathing seem like a complicated skill you have somehow forgotten. Within minutes, an activity previously managed without supervision has become an awkward negotiation between your lungs and your conscious mind. Your lungs would probably like to return to their previous management arrangement.

This is one of the stranger consequences of health-related uncertainty. Your attention begins searching for information that might explain what is happening, and suddenly ordinary physical sensations seem unusually prominent. You notice muscle tension, changes in temperature, a passing itch, or a movement that feels slightly different from yesterday. Some sensations may be associated with a genuine medical condition. Others may be ordinary experiences you previously ignored. The difficulty is that attention makes them more noticeable without necessarily making their meaning clearer. You can become remarkably familiar with a sensation and still have no reliable idea what causes it. Unfortunately, familiarity can create the

impression that you're making progress, especially when you've spent half the afternoon studying one square inch of your own anatomy.

The process begins with something entirely understandable. When a potential threat is uncertain, people often become more alert to information that might clarify it. This heightened attention can be useful when it helps identify meaningful changes or prompts appropriate medical care. Problems arise when attention becomes so broad and persistent that nearly every bodily sensation is treated as a possible clue. Instead of concentrating on the particular concern being evaluated, you begin inspecting unrelated experiences. Your body becomes a building in which every creaking floorboard requires a structural engineering investigation. The building may have been creaking harmlessly for years, but now somebody has installed microphones and hired an unusually nervous inspector.

The spotlight that changes what you notice

Attention works rather like a spotlight. It illuminates something that was previously in the background, making details easier to detect. The spotlight does not, however, tell you whether those details are medically significant. Consider how quickly you become aware of the pressure of your shoes when somebody asks you to concentrate on your feet. That sensation was present before the question, but it wasn't occupying your thoughts. Now you may notice one shoe feels tighter than the other or that your toes are resting at a slightly unexpected angle. These discoveries do not automatically indicate a problem. They show how awareness can change your experience of familiar physical information.

There is an important qualification. Noticing a sensation through increased attention doesn't prove that the sensation

is harmless, imaginary, or caused by anxiety. Real symptoms can be subtle, intermittent, and difficult to describe. They deserve appropriate evaluation when indicated. Equally, an extremely noticeable sensation is not necessarily more serious than one that attracts little attention. Subjective intensity matters as part of a clinical history, but it does not independently establish a diagnosis. The amount of time you spend thinking about a symptom is another matter altogether. A person can devote twelve hours to contemplating an ordinary variation without making that variation twelve hours more medically important.

Imagine Lena, who has been assessed for occasional tingling in her fingers and is waiting for a follow-up appointment. Her clinician has explained the current plan and the changes that should prompt earlier contact. Nevertheless, Lena begins examining her hands whenever she has a spare moment. During a work meeting, she presses her fingertips against the table to compare their sensations. While preparing dinner, she repeatedly opens and closes her hands. Before bed, she checks whether both sides feel identical. Sometimes she notices small differences, which leave her wondering whether they existed before. Her original concern hasn't necessarily changed, but her attention has expanded to include an extraordinary number of additional observations.

The trouble becomes clearer when Lena tries to compare one inspection with another. During the morning meeting, her hands were cold. At dinner, she had been using them continuously. At bedtime, she was tired and already anxious. These circumstances may affect how she experiences sensations, but she cannot reliably separate their contributions through improvised tests. More importantly,