

The Way of the Worrier

Call it Chicken Little Syndrome: For some of us, worry is the filter through which we see the world. But by confronting repetitive thoughts and fears of the unknown, you can stop the sky from falling.

"TRY TO BE MORE POSITIVE."
"YOU HAVE NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT."
"EVERYTHING WILL TURN OUT OK."
"TRY TO GET YOUR MIND OFF OF IT."

If you are a worrier, you have probably heard some, if not all, of this bad advice from well-meaning friends or even from well meaning therapists. If anything, it makes you even more depressed. It makes you feel that people don't understand you.

But there is hope for worriers—and good advice. You must first understand, though, why it is that you worry—and why "just forgetting about it" sends you in exactly the wrong direction.

For example, we now know that:

People are actually less anxious when they are worrying.
Intolerance of uncertainty is a major problem for worriers.
Worriers fear emotions and do not process the meaning of events because they are "too much in their heads."

Worry is a central component of all anxiety disorders and depression. Research shows that worry precedes depression: You literally fret yourself into it. But it is not simply pessimism—it's a reflection of who you are. In order to worry less, you first need to understand the core beliefs that underlie this habit.

WHY YOU WORRY

Worry is a strategy to adapt to a reality that you view as uncertain, out of control, dangerous and filled with problems. You fret in order to help you act responsibly, prevent your worst fears from happening, motivate yourself to get things done, and avoid unpleasant feelings.

But does it really work? You may be collecting the wrong information, focusing on the wrong things, and assuming that everything is dangerous before you test the waters.

When non-worriers look at a threatening image, for example, they feel afraid and their heart rates increase. With repeated exposure to the image, their anxiety diminishes as they adapt to the threat. Worriers, however, are more tense to begin with, so that when they see a threatening image, they show no greater anxiety. The worrier also does not go off high alert with repeated exposure to the threatening image. He does not adapt, and does not engage in emotional learning—that is, recognizing that it really isn't dangerous.

If you are a chronic worrier, the following will seem familiar to you:

"If I Predict It, I Can Prevent It."

Worriers believe that things are about to go out of control. When researchers ask people what they hope to gain from fretting, they say, "Maybe I'll figure out a way to solve my problems." You try to control what will happen by thinking of the worst possibilities and then finding solutions.

If I am worried about bad things happening—failing a test, getting run over by a bus, getting rejected by every woman I talk to— but these things actually do not happen, why don't I abandon my worries and become the happy guy I was meant to be? Because my primitive

brain is saying, "Bob, let's put two and two together. You didn't fail the test, you haven't been hit by a bus and not every woman rejects you. Doesn't that prove that the worry is working? I worried, and bad things didn't happen. Stop bothering me. I'm busy worrying."

"My Feelings Are Out Of Control."

People have probably said to you, "You think too much." There's some truth to this. Worriers have greater difficulty identifying their emotions, they report greater fear of their emotions, and they have more negative views of unpleasant emotions.

Chronic worriers show heightened activity in the cortical (thinking) sections of their brains during worry—and suppressed activity in the limbic/amygdala (emotional) section of the brain. This is in contrast to people with a specific phobia, who show the opposite pattern. Worriers rely on the non emotional parts of their brains to handle threat.

Why is it important to feel the impact of something you fear? Research by a number of psychologists shows that in order to overcome a fear you have to feel *afraid*. You can't just think it through—you have to feel it through.

"But What It...?"

Worriers are intolerant of uncertainty. In fact, worriers prefer to know a negative outcome for sure than face an uncertain outcome that could be positive. As a worrier, you believe that you can consider all of the possible ways that some thing can go wrong and reduce the uncertainty by collecting information and considering every alternative.

You believe you will finally be able to figure things out, or find new information that will make things entirely clear, or arrive at a perfect solution. These attempts to eliminate uncertainty only make you more frustrated. As you think it over, you realize your solution may not absolutely, definitively solve everything. There's still some uncertainty so you reject the solution—and worry some more.

THE WORRY CURE

Once you understand why you worry and why worrying seems to make sense, you can explore what to do—or not do—to help yourself.

Worry More Effectively

In contrast to naive advice such as "just stop worrying," you can try to *worry more* effectively. The important thing is to be able to determine when you should pay attention to a particular worry and when to dismiss it. Is it a problem that's plausible or reasonable? Can you do something about it right now or very soon? This is the difference between thinking about whether you have paid your rent on time, and worrying about whether your house might burn down.

Ask yourself how to turn your questions and ruminations into problems that really need to be solved: "What action should I be taking?" If there is no immediate action to be taken, you can categorize it as a useless worry.

Accept What You Don't Know—And You Never Will

Worriers equate the unknown with danger. The more you tolerate uncertainty; the less worried you will be. Uncertainty training is highly effective in reducing worry and anxiety, significantly helping about two-thirds of chronic worriers. In uncertainty training you practice having the thought thousands of times that "I don't know for sure" or "It's always possible that something terrible could happen."

Nancy thought that she might have HIV even though there was no real evidence that she did. She had not engaged in any high-risk behavior. But she began having this intrusive thought. So she worried and checked her body for any of the early signs of AIDS. I had Nancy repeat for 20 minutes each day, "It's always possible I have AIDS." I told her to do nothing to neutralize this thought—not to try to reassure herself, just practice having the thought that it was possible. As expected, her anxiety went up—and then it went down as she repeated this thought hundreds of times. She began to realize that the thought could be tolerated. In fact, it became boring.

This is different from a popular technique called "thought stopping:" which involves noticing that you have an unwanted thought and then yelling at yourself, "Stop!" Thought stopping does not work. It actually can make things worse, because you believe you need to fear and get rid of the thought. In contrast, thought flooding teaches that you can do nothing to neutralize the thought. You eventually accept that you can never know for sure, and you can recognize that continuing to worry is a total waste of time.

Flooding yourself with thoughts about uncertainty—repeating them endlessly without doing anything to gain certainty—helps you recognize that you can live with ambiguity; it's like getting on the elevator thousands of times. You no longer fear it because it has become boring.

Embrace the Awkward

If you worry, there are many things that you avoid doing or thinking about. A great deal of worry is an attempt to avoid anxiety or other unpleasant emotions. Overcoming your intolerance of frustration—your desire to dodge discomfort—is the central component in learning to stop worrying. In order to do things that you do not want to do, you will need to change your attitude toward discomfort.

José hesitated to approach women because he was afraid of being rejected. I suggested that he commit to do something every day that is uncomfortable but healthy. Whenever he noticed he was feeling anxious, he would deliberately do something that made him uncomfortable: Start a conversation with a woman in a store or ask a woman out. He began to solve his problems by developing a new habit of being uncomfortable.

Start by making discomfort your goal in order to do things you are avoiding. It helps you accomplish your other goals, since it's far more productive to do things that are uncomfortable than to worry about never doing them.

Bore Yourself with Worry

You may believe your worry is out of control and that it pervades every moment of the day. To challenge this, assign a specific time and place for worry. It may seem counterintuitive to you. You probably think that practicing your worries will only increase your worry, and you will be overwhelmed. However, it actually allows you to recognize that your worries are limited and repetitious.

Try it every day for two weeks. Set aside a specific time and place—let's say 30 minutes in the early evening—and sit down to write out your fears as they occur to you. Don't challenge them and don't reassure yourself—just worry. The rest of the time, if you have more worries, jot them down on an index card but put off the actual worrying for later.

After you have been practicing this for a while, you'll find that worry time gives you more of a sense of control. You begin to realize that you can put off your worries and that your fears are repetitive. People eventually find that they cannot fill the 30 minutes, because the same things almost always come up over and over again.

Pay Attention to Your Feelings

People who worry a lot experience guilt about their feelings and believe that they should not have conflicting emotions. They feel they have less control over their emotions, and think that other people would not understand them. They also blame other people for their feelings.

Imagine you had a fear of getting on the elevator. To get over it, you'd have to address the fear by getting on it, and realizing it's not really dangerous. The worrier is like the person who takes tiny steps toward the elevator, but never gets on. In order to get rid of fear and anxiety you need to experience the anxiety to process it—to find out that what you are afraid of really isn't so bad.

You can begin this process by *noticing what emotions* you are *having*. Scan your body one section at a time: Where is the tension? Wherever you feel tension, try to increase it.

This will tune you into your emotions. As you imagine the tension increasing, think back on what you are feeling emotional about.

Recognize that almost everyone has strong feelings, and try to accept your contradictory feelings. Allow yourself to be irrational—people have evolved to use feelings to tell them what they need. Refusing to accept your emotions is like refusing to accept the fact that you are hungry.

There is nothing evil or malicious about having a feeling. Would anyone ever say, "You shouldn't have a headache?" As you experience and accept these emotions, you learn that you are not destroyed by them.

Worries are about the future—a future that may never occur. How do you handle something that may never happen? You can determine if there is some productive worry to address—if there is some action to take right now. If not, then living in the present moment is where the action is. Rather than be a captive of your fears about the future, you can become mindful, appreciative and engulfed in the present moment.

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