

Reducing Stress – Worrying Well



Most of us worry about things from time to time, but for some people worrying and anxiety about things which have an uncertain future become a daily occurrence. Worrying is simply part of our body and mind looking out for threats. It's a natural function of the human mind and it has an adaptive function when it allows us to solve difficult problems. Due to genetic predisposition, your environment and experiences growing up, you may have become hyper-vigilant, such that even small fears cause you to worry incessantly. Then worry can easily turn from a tool into a tyrant, becoming a bad mental habit or even an addiction. That's because there are psychological, brain-based rewards for worrying, even when we worry about things we can't change.

The first psychological reward of worry is that it gives us an *illusion of control*. Worrying about something can partially satisfy a sense that we are controlling or doing something about whatever is worrying us.

A second psychological function of worry is that it can “protect” us by distracting us from thoughts and feelings that might distress us even more than whatever we're worrying about. While this may postpone emotional pain, it prevents us from coming to terms with what's bothering us and keeps us stuck in a state of emotional limbo.

A type of therapy called Internal Family Systems considers it vitally important that these protector parts of our mind are addressed before we can deal with the root causes or 'deep wounds' that cause anxiety.

This is a very simple overview of some simple tips you can do to 'worry better.' If you undertake counselling your therapist will be able to work with you on your specific worries.

1. Are you a bad worrier?

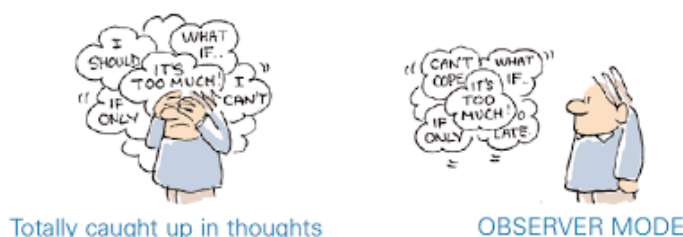
Bad Worry is fretting about things you can't do anything about and focusing on the outcomes that you don't want to have happen. This is the worst possible way to worry, because not only doesn't it solve the problem, it fritters away energy and, worse, can frighten and depress you. By dwelling on the terrible outcomes you imagine, and turning them over and over in your mind, you may be doing harm to your body which may trigger the development of physical disease as well as resulting in emotional distress and poor sleep. Research shows that when we are in certain chemical (emotional) brain states, it is easier to access memories and feelings that we had when we were previously in that same state. It is also more difficult to access thoughts that are not connected to that emotional state. When we are angry or scared, it's easy to connect to other angry or scared thoughts and feelings, but harder to connect to those that may be calm or forgiving. This situation is called state-dependency.

We see state-dependency in everyday life. Have you ever become angry at your partner and all of a sudden you remember everything he or she ever did that made you angry? Emotional

memories seem to be filed according to the emotions they create as much or more than they are by their content. To best use your mental resources, you need to shift out of a frightened state to one that will open the emotional doors to a broader range of memory and experience. Becoming an **observer** of your own thoughts will help you do this.

To help you clarify and sort your worries more easily, it will help if you take a mental step back and learn to observe your thoughts. Most of us think that we are our thoughts, or our minds, and that makes them difficult to change.

2. The Observing Self



When we become aware of our thoughts and feelings, we can make choices about which ones we focus on, which ones we energise, which ones we keep, and which ones we let go of or minimise. It's important to know that we have thoughts, **but we are not our thoughts**, and we don't need to be victimised by our thoughts. This awareness is critical for breaking up our habitual thinking patterns and worries.

The observing self is the ability we have to disconnect or defuse from our thoughts, emotions and urges. See the recordings on the blog page which you can download on how to do this. You will see that another type of therapy called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) suggests that we can consider our thoughts as cars passing in the road outside – just observe them, name them if you want to, and accept them with compassion and no judgement.

3. Sorting your worries



Being aware of your ability to observe gives you a perspective from which you can become aware of and possibly change patterns of thinking and feelings that are causing you unnecessary worry, anxiety, and stress.

You can now start to **clarify** your worries by simply writing them all down. Writing down your worries will make you more aware of the types and sources of your worries and help you begin to sort out and prioritise them. It also tends to free up your conscious and unconscious brain (so you don't have to worry about forgetting them!) and there is evidence that just doing this can reduce a little of the anxiety. But for some people, actually writing down and thinking about all the things that worry you, can itself be a bit anxiety-provoking, but it is a step toward having less worry, so stay with it. One of the benefits of listing worries during the day is that

your brain can relax more when sleeping. There's not going to be anything on your list that doesn't already worry you. If you find yourself getting tense or anxious while you're writing, take a breath and do a body scan as a grounding exercise (see MP3 recording download).

The next step is to **clarify your worries and sort them** into two categories: those you can do something about and those you cannot. Sometimes this will be easy, but sometimes you may be stumped by some of your concerns and have some trouble knowing to which category they belong. This is why one of the requests made in the Serenity Prayer is for the wisdom to know the difference. The Serenity Prayer, as used by Alcoholics Anonymous and many other organisations, can offer us much wisdom:

*"God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference".*

Start to **sort your worries** into categories. Once you have your list create a table like the example below. Go through the worries on your list and put anything that is potentially changeable in the left-hand column, whether or not you intend to act on it, and whether or not it would be easy or difficult. Everything that you could change goes in that column. Anything that you think you cannot change goes in the right-hand column - this column is for all the things that you cannot change with a physical or mental action—like the passage of time, the weather etc. Anything that you cannot decide to put in either the left or right column goes in the middle "not sure" column.

Sorting your worries – worrying about family relationships

TOP 10 Worries about Family

Can Possibly Change	Not Sure	Can't Change
Relationship with my aunt - 5	Changing my job - 5	My crying baby - 8
Forgiving my sister - 8	Mum's attitudes towards me -8	Value of my house - 5
Don't want to see family - 8	Partner's view of life - 7	Stepdad's health - 6
	Finances – spending - 6	

When you are done sorting your worries, take another five minutes or so to take a closer look at this middle column. As you consider each of the worries listed there, think about whether you could possibly change some aspect of each situation, and if so, move that piece of the worry to the left-hand column. Any aspect that you cannot imagine changing, put in the right column. Any situations you remain unsure of leave in the middle column. This simple process sometimes provides interesting insights. Once you've listed and sorted your worries, go down each column and place a number from zero to ten next to each to indicate how much distress each worry causes you. Ten denotes something agonising that causes you tremendous distress, and 0 means it doesn't really bother you at all (and probably shouldn't even be on the list). Then start to resolve your worries.

4. Resolving your worries

Letting go of bad worries – those that you cannot change

A ritual is a series of steps that represents a chosen action in symbols. There are rituals from every religious and spiritual tradition, or you can create your own. Rituals can be external, involving physical actions that may be witnessed by others, or internal, performed in the quiet and privacy of your own mind. A letting-go ritual can be as simple as imagining a worry being held in your closed fist and then opening your fist to let it go. You can add words like “I now release my worry about XYZ,” or you can simply say, “Good riddance.” You can make your ritual more powerful by using mental imagery. You can, for instance, imagine that you feed your worries to hungry birds that gobble them up and fly away, or that you tie them to big coloured helium balloons and let them go, watching them float away until you can’t tell whether you can see them or not. It’s important for some people to physically carry out their letting-go ritual by writing down the worry and finding a way to release it – for example - you can also write your worries on paper and then burn the paper in a safe place and watch the worries go up in smoke. Your ritual can be as simple or as elaborate as you like.

Good Worry - addressing items in the possibly change and not sure columns

Good worry is worry that focuses on a problem you may be able to do something about. Specific ways of both logical and emotional/intuitive thinking can help make you much more effective in resolving these issues or problems. When we have a problem, or worry that we can potentially do something about, there are a few common reasons for not making progress. Perhaps the most common is that we aren’t really clear on what it is we want to do; we have left the issue so vague and uncertain that no goal can be set. So, start to work through these good worries one at a time, starting with being clear about your goal.

Undertake a 7-step plan of action

1. So, step 1 is to Clarify your goal – what you actually want and why?
2. Step 2: Generate options of how you could achieve your goal through creative brainstorming – perhaps with a friend or mentor.
3. Choose the best option – evaluate your options by considering which gives the greatest chance of success. The option chosen needs to be “small enough to manage and big enough to matter.”
4. Affirm your plan, by writing out a statement of what you are going to do.
5. Detail your plan. You need to be able to divide it up into small tasks. For example, losing 30 pounds in weight might start with just a pound a week through committing to eating less or walking further ‘Chunk it or junk it.’ If you can’t divide it up into small steps, then junk it!
6. Rehearse your plan with imagery – e.g. asking your boss for a pay rise. Visualisation is a very powerful tool to stimulate your brain. By imagining what you see, hear, and feel as you go through your action plan, and especially by allowing yourself to really feel the emotional benefits of success, you create new neural pathways in your brain that align those good feelings with the image of successfully carrying out your plan.
7. Start acting out your plan with the first small task!