



NHS Fife Department of Psychology



# Dealing with worry

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## Why Worry?

Everyone worries from time to time. Too much worry can be bad as it leaves us feeling tense and anxious. Even though we might say to ourselves and to others – "Stop worrying. It's pointless. It won't do any good" – there is something about worrying that makes it hard to stop. This is because worry can be helpful.

### Useful worry prompts action. All other worry is pointless.

- Worry is useful if it makes you pay attention. Worrying about the weather cannot stop it raining on your washing. However, if you watch the sky and **act** to bring in your washing when it rains, then being aware that it may rain will have helped.
- Worry is useful, provided it is turned into a plan for action. For example, worrying that your electricity might get cut off might lead you to **act** to pay your bill on time. Once the bill has been paid the worrying would stop and you would feel better.
- Worry is useful if it helps you be better prepared. Worry may help you think about "what you could do if...", or "what would happen if...". Worrying "what would happen if my house was burgled" could make you **act** to take out house insurance and lock your front door when you go out.

## Worry without action does nothing.

If worry on its own did something then we could worry all day to increase our bank balance. On the other hand taking action such as selling something, working more hours or spending less **will** directly affect our bank balance.

## Is it worth worrying about?

There are four things that are not worth worrying about but that account for a lot of our worries: the unimportant, the unlikely, the uncertain and the uncontrollable. Ban these from your life, and you will worry less.

## The Unimportant

It is easy to fill your life with worries about little things. When you find yourself worrying, start to question yourself instead. Ask yourself, "How important is the thing that I am worrying about?" Here are three points to help you answer this question.

1. **The 5 year rule.** Ask yourself "will this matter in 5 years time?" This is a way of looking at your worry from a long-term point o view. View your worries in different ways: will this still be a concern in a week, a month, a year?

2. **The measuring rod.** Ask yourself: "Where, on a scale of bad experiences, is the thing I'm worried about?" Think about a very bad experience you have had. How does your current worry feel when compared with this.

3. **The calculator.** Ask yourself. "How much worry is this worth?" We only have a certain amount of time and energy. Make sure you do not spend more worry on your problem than it is worth. You need your time and energy for more important things. Maybe some time you would have spent worrying could be used for **doing** something. When you have thought about these three points, decide if your worry seems unimportant. If so, try to stop worrying and distract yourself by using some of the techniques on page 6. If you still feel your worry is important keep reading.

## The Unlikely

A lot of worries ask "What if..." questions. All kinds of terrible things could happen today or tomorrow but most things are very unlikely. If you allow yourself to worry about the unlikely then there will be no end to your worrying. Tackling existing problems is hard enough. Do not waste time, energy and happiness on problems that do not exist.

## The Uncertain

Often we do not know how something will turn out. Many things we worry about have not yet happened and we can only take action once we know what has happened. For example, worrying that you may have failed a test or exam is not going to improve the results. It is only once the results are released that you can decide what, if anything, needs to be done.

## The Uncontrollable

We have no control over many of the things we worry about. For example, worrying that you are getting older does not change the fact that in a day's time you will be a day older. This will be the case even if you worry as hard as you can.

## Dealing with persistent worries

Thinking about the type of worry you have using the exercises above may help you stop worrying. However, some worries are very difficult to get rid of and keep going through your mind. On the next page we will look at further action you can take to deal with those worries.

## Stepping through worries

Still worrying? Try these three steps to help deal with the worries. Worries can be divided into two types: those you **can** do something about and those you **can't**.

1. Be clear what the worry is.
  - a. Ask yourself "What am I worrying about?"
  - b. Think about each worry and write them down one at a time.
  - c. Try to write down the worries as clearly as you can.

## 2. Decide if something can be done.

- a. Look at each worry you have written down and ask yourself, "Is there anything I can do about this?"
- b. Use the examples on pages 3 and 4 to help you decide. Be honest with yourself when answering. If the answer is no then you can be certain that no matter how much you worry, nothing will change.
- c. Think it through and try to explain to yourself that there is no point in worrying. Try distraction, there are hints on how to do this on the next page.
- d. If the answer is yes, something could be done, go to step 3 and think about what it is you could do.

## 3. Write a list of things you could do to solve your worry.

- a. Look at your list and ask yourself "Is there anything I could do right now?"
- b. If there is something you could do right away then **do it**.
- c. If there is nothing you can do right away then make a plan of **when, where** and **how** you will tackle the problem.
- d. When you have done what you can, tell yourself that you have done what is needed and continue with your day.

## Ways to distract yourself

You can only pay full attention to one thing at a time. Keeping yourself busy will leave no room for worry. Below are some useful hints on how to distract yourself.

**Physical Activity.** Giving yourself a task to do takes your mind off worrying thoughts. Keeping yourself physically active by doing some exercise is a good way to stop worrying thoughts.

**Mental Games.** Doing puzzles, crosswords, reciting a poem or a song and counting backwards from one hundred are all useful distraction exercise.

**Focus on your Surroundings.** Concentrate on a specific detail of the world around you, for example making words out of number plates of cars or guessing what people do for a living. Focusing on the outside world will prevent you from thinking about your worries. Sometimes your attention may drift from what you are doing to a worry. If this happens, say to yourself that you have done all you can for now. Remind yourself that there is nothing more that can be done today and shift your attention back to your task. Do not use distraction techniques as a way of avoiding dealing with your worries. Go through the steps above before using distraction.

## Clean Your Head – Ready For Bed

People often worry more at night. One way of dealing with worrying thoughts is to plan your days ahead. Hold a daily planning session, which you use to work through your worries and problems.

### Planning sessions

- Set aside 20 minutes in the early evening, after your meal.
- Sit in a quiet room. Have pencil and notebook to hand.
- Think about how the day has gone. Write down the things you achieved.
- Think about problem areas and anything you haven't finished. Write down the way you intend to tackle each of these and when you will do so. **Do not do anything about them at this time.**

- If these matters are on your mind when you are in bed, put them off until daytime.

Remind yourself that you have already written down a plan for the worry.

- If it is a **new** worry/problem and you cannot stop thinking about it, **get out of bed**, and add it to your planning list. Remind yourself that bed is not the place to think about such things and that you can do no more. The problem is on your list and you will look at it closely the following day.

## Boxing in your worries

If you are snowed under by worry, try to set aside a regular half an hour every day to worry. Decide on a time and place that will be "worry time" and stick to it. If you start to worry at other times, postpone the worry until "worry time" and return your focus to what you were doing. During "worry time" let your mind worry freely. Take a pen and paper and write down your worries one by one. Use the stepping through worries steps on page 5. Some people find that they are unable to worry to order and so the worry time ends up being trouble free!

## Share your worries

Worries do not survive well outside our heads. Talking about a worry can help us to see the bigger picture and can help with finding possible solutions or planning actions. Try and meet a friend or relative and tell them what is on your mind. We all worry and you can be sure they will also have things that they worry about.

## Further Help:

### Books

Carlson, R (1997) *Don't sweat the small stuff*. Hodder and Stoughton, London. ISBN: 0340708018

Butler, G and Hope, T (1995) *Manage Your Mind*. Oxford ISBN: 0192623834 (Chapter 16 is particularly relevant.)

Tallis, F (1990) *How to Stop Worrying*. Sheldon ISBN: 085969103

### Helpline:

Breathing space - **0800 83 85 87**

*A free, confidential helpline to talk about any worries you may have.*

Originally Developed by S Black, J Hastings, M Henderson 2005, NHS Borders

***Developed with assistance from: The National Programme for Improving Mental***

***Health and Well Being***

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