

HOW TO STOP WORRYING

Self-Help Strategies for Anxiety Relief

Worrying can be helpful when it spurs you to take action and solve a problem. But if you're preoccupied with "what ifs" and worst-case scenarios, worry becomes a problem of its own. Unrelenting doubts and fears can be paralyzing. They can sap your emotional energy, send your anxiety levels soaring, and interfere with your daily life. But chronic worrying is a mental habit that can be broken. You can train your brain to stay calm and look at life from a more balanced, less fearful perspective.

Why is it so hard to stop worrying?

No one likes the way constant worrying makes you feel, so why is it so difficult to stop? The answer lies in the beliefs, both negative and positive, you have about worrying.

On the negative side, you may believe that your constant worrying is going to spiral completely out of control, drive you crazy, or damage your health. On the positive side, you may believe that your worrying helps you avoid bad things, prepare for the worst, or come up with solutions. You may even believe that worrying shows you're a caring and conscientious person.

Negative beliefs, or worrying about worrying, add to your anxiety and keep it going (in much the same way worrying about getting to sleep often keeps you awake). But positive beliefs about worrying can be even more damaging. It's tough to break the worry habit if you believe that your worrying protects you. In order to stop worry and anxiety for good, you must give up your belief that worrying serves a positive purpose. Once you realise that worrying is the problem, not the solution, you can regain control of your worried mind.

Why You Keep Worrying

You have mixed feelings about your worries. On one hand, your worries are bothering you – you can't sleep, and you can't get these pessimistic thoughts out of your head. But there is a way that these worries make sense to you. For example, you might think:

- Maybe I'll find a solution
- I don't want to overlook anything
- If I keep thinking a little longer, maybe I'll figure it out
- I don't want to be surprised
- I want to be responsible.

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You have a hard time giving up on your worries because, in a sense, your worries have been working for you.

Source: The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You, Robert L. Leahy, Ph.D.

Learn to postpone worrying

1. Create a "worry period"
Choose a set time and place for worrying. It should be the same every day (e.g., in the living room from 5:00pm to 5:20 pm) and early enough that it won't make you anxious right before bedtime. During your worry period, you're allowed to worry about whatever's on your mind. The rest of the day, however, is a worry-free zone.
2. Postpone your worry
If an anxious thought or worry comes into your head during the day, make a brief note of it and then continue about your day. Remind yourself that you'll have time to think about it later, so there's no need to worry about it right now.
3. Go over your "worry list" during the worry period
If the thoughts you wrote down are still bothering you, allow yourself to worry about them, but only for the amount of time you've specified for your worry period. If they don't seem important any more, cut your worry period short and enjoy the rest of your day.

Postponing worrying is effective because it breaks the habit of dwelling on worries when you've got other things to do, yet there's no struggle to suppress the thought or judge it. You simply save it for later. And as you develop the ability to postpone your anxious thoughts, you'll start to realise that you have more control than you think.

Ask yourself if the problem is solvable

Research shows that while you're worrying, you temporarily feel less anxious. Running over the problem in your head distracts you from your emotions and makes you feel like you're getting something accomplished. But worrying and problem solving are two very different things.

Problem solving involves evaluating a situation, coming up with concrete steps for dealing with it, and then putting the plan into action. Worrying, on the other hand, rarely leads to solutions. No matter how much time you spend dwelling on worst-case scenarios, you're no more prepared to deal with them should they actually happen.

Distinguish between solvable and unsolvable worries

If a worry pops into your head, start by asking yourself whether the problem is something you can actually solve.

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The following questions can help:

- Is the problem something you're currently facing, rather than an imaginary what-if?
- If the problem is an imaginary what-if, how likely is it to happen? Is your concern realistic?
- Can you do something about the problem or prepare for it, or is it out of your control?

Productive, solvable worries are those you can take action on right away

For example, if you're worried about your bills, you could call your creditors to see about flexible payment options. Unproductive, unsolvable worries are those for which there is no corresponding action. "What if I get cancer someday?" or "What if my kid gets into an accident?"

If the worry is solvable, start brainstorming

Make a list of all the possible solutions you can think of. Try not to get too hung up on finding the perfect solution. Focus on the things you have the power to change, rather than the circumstances or realities beyond your control. After you've evaluated your options, make a plan of action. Once you have a plan and start doing something about the problem, you'll feel much less worried.

Dealing with unsolvable worries

But what if the worry isn't something you can solve? If you're a chronic worrier, the vast majority of your anxious thoughts probably fall in this camp. In such cases, it's important to tune into your emotions.

As previously mentioned, worrying helps you avoid unpleasant emotions. Worrying keeps you in your head, thinking about how to solve problems rather than allowing yourself to feel the underlying emotions. But you can't worry your emotions away. While you're worrying, your feelings are temporarily suppressed, but as soon as you stop, they bounce back. And then, you start worrying about your feelings: "What's wrong with me? I shouldn't feel this way!"

The only way out of this vicious cycle is by learning to embrace your feelings. This may seem scary at first because of negative beliefs you have about emotions. For example, you may believe that you should always be rational and in control, that your feelings should always make sense, or that you shouldn't feel certain emotions, such as fear or anger.

The truth is that emotions, like life, are messy. They don't always make sense and they're not always pleasant. But as long as you can accept your feelings as part of being human, you'll be able to experience them without becoming overwhelmed and learn how to use them to your advantage.

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