

WORRY

WHY WE WORRY,
WHAT IT DOES TO US,
AND HOW WE CAN STOP



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INTRODUCTION

Worrying is the normal human response to uncertainty.

We worry when we don't know what's going on, how to respond, or what the outcome may be. This is a sensation that everyone is familiar with.

We primarily worry about the future and what it may hold. It's not just worrying about ourselves. We worry about our family, job, finances, home, and the world. The future is uncertain, and worry is proof that part of us is aware of this uncertainty. **Avoiding worry means becoming more comfortable with uncertainty.**

In many cases, we worry about losing what we already have: health, comfort, and support, to name a few.

Important decisions create a strong sense of worry because big decisions create new circumstances and plunge us into the unknown. This is why procrastination is so popular. It seems better to deal with the uncertainty you already have, rather than create additional uncertainty.

On some level, we also believe that worrying is productive. After all, a day spent deep in worry is tiring.

This feeling of mental fatigue convinces us that we've done a lot of work. But this thinking is akin to spending a day digging a hole and expecting your car to start running better.

A better use of worry is to recognize that some part of you is uncomfortable. There may be a good reason for this discomfort, or there may not. Treat worry as an alarm that something might be wrong.

When worry is viewed as a warning, it isn't necessary to delve deeper into the worry. A solution can be sought instead.

"Worrying is carrying tomorrow's load with today's strength - carrying two days at once. It is moving into tomorrow ahead of time. Worrying doesn't empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength."

- Corrie Ten Boom

HEALTH ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH WORRY

Worry doesn't just sap your happiness. **Worry can also contribute to a wide variety of health issues that can be eliminated or improved by minimizing your worrying habit.** Worry is a form of stress. Your doctor will never tell you that you need more stress in your life.

Your body releases stress hormones when you worry. These hormones can have a negative impact on your blood sugar, triglycerides, digestion, mood, blood vessels, heart, and immune system.

Stress can make you more physically capable in the very short-term, but harms your health in the long-term.

See how worry can damage your health and shorten your life:

1. **Heart Disease. Stress has been found to increase heart rate, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels.** Worry can also increase the likelihood of obesity, which contributes to heart disease.

2. **Diabetes.** Worrying has been shown to increase blood sugar levels in those with Type II diabetes. Again, worrying also contributes to overeating and poor nutritional choices. These behaviors contribute to the formation of the disease.
3. **Headaches.** Those that suffer from regular headaches, including migraines, will attest to the fact that worrying can cause headaches.
4. **Stomach and intestinal issues.** Stress doesn't cause ulcers, but it can make them worse. Heartburn and irritable bowel syndrome have been linked to worrying. Some people even vomit when faced with a stressful enough situation.
5. **Obesity.** High stress causes higher levels of the hormone cortisol, which has been shown to increase the storage of belly fat. Worrying can also affect eating habits. Obesity is a major contributor to many other diseases.
6. **Depression.** Worrying too much can bring you down. Those that worry excessively are 80% more likely to develop depression. Depression can lead to other psychological issues and even suicide.

7. **Premature aging.** Stress and worry can prematurely age your DNA! ***Studies have shown that the chromosomal damage experienced by those with high levels of stress mimic chromosomes of those up to 15 years older.***

Worrying isn't just unpleasant. It can kill you!

How you handle stress and worry can impact your physical health and longevity. Remember that stress is only the trigger. It's your response that can cause health problems. ***Excessive worry will have a negative effect on your health.*** Choose a healthy response to worry, and your health will be enhanced.

“Never let the future disturb you. You will meet it, if you have to, with the same weapons of reason which today arm you against the present.”

- Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

SIGNS THAT YOU WORRY TOO MUCH

How can you know if you're worrying too much? ***There are common signs that you're spending too much time and energy on worry.*** By recognizing these symptoms, you can begin to take control of your worrying habit. A little worry is normal. Excessive worry gets in the way of enjoying life and resolving your challenges.

Notice the signs of excessive worry:

1. **Sleep disturbances.** Do you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep? Do you wake up feeling anxious or as if your mind is racing? If so, the cause may be excessive worrying. Everyone has an occasional night of poor sleep or worries before a big event, but regular disturbances in sleep are neither normal nor healthy.
 - ▶ Take note of how many hours you normally sleep. If the number suddenly drops and you're not making up the time on the weekends, you may be worrying too much. **Consistent sleep is necessary for optimal health.**

2. **Muscle tension.** You may have experienced pain in your neck, back, or jaw from excessive tension. If you regularly feel muscle tension in one or more parts of your body, you might be worrying more than you should.
 - ▶ Tension headaches are another common sign of excessive worry.

3. **Chronic digestion issues.** Indigestion, irritable bowel syndrome, constipation, diarrhea, and stomachaches can all be signs that your worrying is out of control.
 - ▶ If you're regularly having difficulties with your digestive system, be sure to see your physician.

4. **Difficulties concentrating.** Poor concentration can affect every part of your life. Even with moderate stress and worry, it's possible to maintain a good level of concentration on any task. ***If you're unable to keep your mind on your current task, you might be worrying too much.***

5. **Do you worry constantly?** It's natural to worry about a specific event, but if your days are filled with

worry about anything and everything, your worrying is excessive.

- ▶ How much of your day do you spend worrying?
Ask your friends how much they worry.

6. **Does your worrying interfere with your obligations?** Are you too worried about work to attend your daughter's softball game? Are you so worried about your finances that you're missing days of work?

Do you experience any of these signs of excessive worry? ***If you're dealing with these symptoms on a regular basis, your health and happiness are at stake.*** Consider this a warning and begin the process of forming more positive responses to stressful situations.

"If a problem is fixable, if a situation is such that you can do something about it, then there is no need to worry. If it's not fixable, then there is no help in worrying. There is no benefit in worrying whatsoever."

- Dalai Lama XIV

COMMON CAUSES OF WORRY

Humans are more similar to each other than they are different. ***Most of your worries are the same as those of your friends and family.*** Unless you're mentally ill, you're going to worry from time to time. Take comfort in the fact that others have the same concerns as you do.

The most common causes of worry include:

1. **Money, bills, and other financial issues.** It's not just the financially challenged that worry about money. Even the wealthy are plagued with worry about their finances.
 - ▶ The only true solutions to money issues are spending less, earning more, or bankruptcy. One or more of these options is necessary to create change in your financial situation.
2. **Work-related issues often cause sleepless nights.** In this case, the worry might be due to a fear of losing your job and the resulting financial challenges. Worry can also be related to dealing with difficult personalities, giving a presentation, or a looming deadline.

- ▶ ***It's inevitable that work will be a cause of stress from time to time.*** You spend a lot of time there. It's a competitive environment. It's also your primary source of income. How could it not cause worry?
3. **Relationship issues are another common source of worry.** Our close relationships can be a source of stress or drama. This is especially true of romantic relationships. Common worries include:
- ▶ Am I with the right person?
 - ▶ Does she love me?
 - ▶ Will he leave me?
 - ▶ Is he cheating on me?
 - ▶ Will I ever find my soulmate?
4. **Are you worried about your health?** The survival instinct is among the strongest. If your health is failing, it only makes sense to be concerned. If you weren't worried about your health, you would've

fallen off a cliff or accidentally stepped in front of a bus years ago.

5. **What do I want to do with my life?** Most of us end up working in an office environment, yet it would be difficult to find a child with that dream.
 - ▶ It's easy to find yourself stuck with what appears to be a bleak future. ***You have time to change course and create a meaningful life.***
6. **Children are an endless source of worry.** We worry if they're safe. We worry whether we're being good parents. Kids can get sick, struggle with school, or struggle socially. Whenever you care about something or someone, you're likely to worry.
7. **The future is the true cause of worry.** All worries are grounded in the future. You couldn't worry if you never thought about the future. If you're worried, you're worried about something not working out well in the future.

What do you worry about? Has your worrying ever helped?

You have the same worries as your friends, family, and neighbors. ***We all worry about the same things!*** Take comfort in the fact that you're just like everyone else. Worrying is a common behavior.

"Do not anticipate trouble, or worry about what may never happen. Keep in the sunlight."

-Benjamin Franklin

WORRYING DOESN'T WORK

Has your worrying every solved a single problem? It hasn't. Think about it for a few minutes. ***The only positive outcome of worry is when it leads to action that solves the challenge that created the worry.*** Beyond that, worrying only makes you less effective in dealing with life's trials and tribulations.

Worrying has never:

- ▶ Paid a bill
- ▶ Turned around a failing relationship
- ▶ Made a sick person well
- ▶ Improved anyone's physique
- ▶ Changed anyone's mood to one more positive
- ▶ Made a job more fun or secure
- ▶ Taken out the trash

- ▶ Mowed the grass
- ▶ Painted the house
- ▶ Or kept the mother-in-law away

More often than not, the thing you worry about never happens. And when it does, it's rarely as bad as you anticipated. **Worrying is a means of torturing yourself.** It's self-inflicted. Take control and resolve that you're going to worry less.

Since worry isn't a productive emotion, there must be a more effective option.

COPING STRATEGIES FOR WORRYING

When you worry, you inevitably turn to one or more coping mechanisms. These behaviors can either be harmful, neutral, or helpful. **When you're worried, the worst thing you can do is make your challenges even more significant.** Yet, that's exactly what many people choose to do.

Negative coping behaviors make life more challenging.

Consider:

- ▶ Drinking
- ▶ Drugs
- ▶ Overeating
- ▶ Casual sex

All of these behaviors tend to create additional challenges down the road. All have the potential to cause harm.

These behaviors serve to distract, fail to solve the source of your worry, and make life even harder. It would be wise to consider removing these coping mechanisms from your list of habits. If you're worried about your finances, will the health issues associated with obesity put more money in your bank account?

Neutral coping behaviors fail to address the source of your worry, but don't cause additional harm.

A few examples include:

- ▶ Watching television
- ▶ Surfing the internet
- ▶ Reading a frivolous book
- ▶ Listening to music

These coping behaviors won't make your challenges worse, but do nothing to address the cause. However, they may put you in a better mental state to begin making real progress. Neutral coping behaviors are less harmful and potentially more effective than negative coping behaviors.

Consider engaging in positive coping behaviors when faced with worry:

- ▶ Exercise
- ▶ Connecting with friends or family who are positive and uplifting
- ▶ Meditation
- ▶ Prayer
- ▶ Sleep

These behaviors might not help to eliminate the source of your worry, but they are all options that contribute to your physical and emotional health. When possible, turn to this type of behavior when faced with situations that cause worry.

Everyone is forced to deal with worry. **What differs between people is their response to worry.** Some choose to address the cause of worry. Others distract themselves. Some choose to worry even more.

The most effective solution to worry is addressing it directly. Anything else is an attempt to distract yourself.

"I am reminded of the advice of my neighbor. "Never worry about your heart till it stops beating."

- E.B. White

WHAT TO DO WHEN WORRY STRIKES

Regardless of your personality, mental fortitude, or good fortune, something will eventually happen that triggers worry. It's inevitable. ***While you can't completely avoid worry, you can choose your reaction. Develop a process for dealing with worry that addresses the cause.***

By focusing on solutions, you can remove the trigger and get on with your life.

Have a plan for dealing with worry that focuses on solutions:

1. **Notice that you're worrying.** That's always the first step. Notice that you're worrying. This is trickier than you think. Mental patterns are very habitual. You've been thinking the same way about the world for a long time. Worrying can start to feel normal.
 - ▶ Ideally, you'll only worry for a moment before you're able to say, "I'm worrying."

2. **Ask yourself why.** Do you know why you're worrying? Just ask yourself, "What am I worried about?" Listen to the answer you receive. Some worries disappear by shining a light on them.

3. **Question the validity of the worry.** It's easy to worry about unreasonable things. You may be worried about your job security due to the announcement of future cutbacks. Do you really have a reason to worry?
 - ▶ Are the cutbacks likely to affect your department?

 - ▶ Do you have a good relationship with your boss?

 - ▶ Can anyone else do your job?

 - ▶ How was your last performance review?

 - ▶ Can you get additional information from a reliable source?

 - ▶ Ensure you have a legitimate reason to worry before you start worrying.

4. **Can you do anything about it?** Why worry if there's nothing you can do to fix it? Whatever is going to happen will happen whether you worry or not. You may as well enjoy yourself as much as possible right now.
- ▶ If you can do something about it, why worry?
There's no reason to worry about a situation you can fix! Get busy fixing it.
5. **What can be done to create a solution?** Assuming you can create a more acceptable outcome, what can you do?
- ▶ ***Create a plan to solve your dilemma.*** For example, if you're worried about funding your upcoming vacation, you might consider:
 - Finding a part-time job
 - Tightening your budget
 - Canceling cable
 - Carpooling to work

- Asking for a raise
 - Finding a job with a higher salary
- ▶ **Follow your new plan.** Continuously evaluate the effectiveness of your plan. Avoid operating with blinders.
6. **Avoid procrastinating.** The solution to the source of your worry might not be enjoyable, but you can relax when you're finished. **The more you procrastinate, the more likely you are to worry.** Your worrying will increase as the amount of time you have to rectify the situation shrinks. Take a deep breath and get started. Freedom from worry is the ultimate reward.
7. **Stay focused.** You only worry when your mind starts to wander and you think negative thoughts. Keep your attention on your solution. Attempt to get the necessary work done with a smile on your face and an overall feeling of calmness.
- ▶ **Prayer and meditation can be effective tools to help gain and maintain focus.** A few minutes spent on these activities can be well-spent.

8. **Realize that worrying is an unproductive habit.** If worrying doesn't help and it doesn't feel good, how does it ever become a habit? ***Because you've fooled yourself into believing that it's beneficial.***

- ▶ You've worried about plenty of things. In most cases, everything turns out okay. It's natural for your brain to link worrying with acceptable results.
- ▶ Having the cognitive awareness that worrying is a waste of time isn't enough to eliminate the worry habit.

Wouldn't any of these actions be more effective than responding to worry by sitting on the couch with a bag of chips and watching Seinfeld reruns? ***You can choose your response to worry.*** Ensure that your response makes sense.

"Live a good life. More smiling, less worrying. More compassion, less judgment. More blessed, less stressed. More love, less hate."

- Roy Bennett

CONCLUSION

Worrying is one of the most common activities undertaken by human beings. ***We can't help ourselves. We have trained ourselves to believe that worrying is productive.*** However, worrying is a counterproductive habit that needlessly sacrifices our effectiveness, health, and sense of well-being.

Many health issues are caused or exacerbated by excessive worry. Worrying not only fails to address the cause of the worry, but it can also permanently damage your health.

Behaviors that cope with the discomfort of worry can range from harmful to neutral to positive. ***The most effective coping behavior is either addressing the cause of the worry or letting go of worry.***

When faced with worry, recognize that your brain is providing a warning. Intelligently and logically choose a course of action. You may or may not have a legitimate reason to worry. Allowing worry to build only creates additional stress. Minimize your worry and give yourself the mental space you need to be at your best.