

## How to Reduce Worrying - A Client's Guide

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### What is worry?

Worrying bothers almost everyone periodically. Whenever we are facing problems, our minds will be addressing them and trying to figure out what to do. The mind is a remarkable instrument, able to call back past memories and to picture possible future events. And with these abilities, it can take advantage of everything we have learned to help us to adapt to the world. But at times, worry can create emotional stress. We can find ourselves thinking about past events which were depressing or anxiety-provoking at the time they happened, or we can think about all kinds of future events that might happen and which would make us feel badly if they did. At times, for no obvious reason, we just can't stop thinking about such things. And each time we do think about them, our bodies react just as if the event were actually happening or about to happen.

For example, recall the last time someone criticized you or said something hurtful. Or think about a friend acting in an unkind way towards you in the future. The more you think about this happening, the worse you will feel. The amazing thing about thinking about such events is that they are not actually happening right now. They exist only in our minds. Yet how we feel right now is being influenced by something that no longer exists or does not yet exist. It may have existed in the past, but it is no longer happening. Or it may occur in the future but only as a possibility, not a certainty.

Most of the time, should such thoughts come to mind, we recognize that those events are not happening and can readily dismiss them. At other times, however, we find we cannot ignore such thoughts. They continue to return to our awareness, and we just cannot stop them. Worry refers to this kind of constant preoccupation with our past or future bad events -- a type of thinking that makes us feel just as if we are reliving a past event or living out a future one-- and we cannot stop those thoughts from occurring. Such thoughts are well characterized by the phrases, "If only..." and "What if..."

"If only..." refers to thoughts about an unhappy event that has happened and we wish it hadn't. The event has left us with an unresolved emotional feeling, and under these circumstances our mind continues to try to resolve it, trying to figure out what went wrong and how to fix it. Unfortunately, in many cases, because the event has already happened, nothing can be done. We cannot go back into the past and miraculously have the event turn out differently. But when our mind recalls the event, its natural tendency is to keep trying to solve the problem it represented.

"What if..." refers to thoughts about the future. In the case of worry, these thoughts are about any number of possible disagreeable things that could happen. What if I have an automobile accident? What if I run out of money and can't pay my bills? What if my spouse should someday no longer love me? What if I make a mistake and everyone thinks I'm a fool because of it? Each of these is a **possible** future event. If we think about it enough, we can make ourselves depressed or anxious, no matter how unlikely it is that such an event will actually happen.

### When is worry too much worry?

Now, most people will worry if a past unpleasant event has just happened and if it involved something or someone very important to us. Suddenly losing our money, or having a hurtful argument with someone close to us, or having an automobile accident, or making a mistake will naturally result in our minds trying to cope with the feelings that those events aroused. Similarly, most of us worry if a highly probable unwanted event is coming our way. If we have to drive in very bad weather, or a sudden large expense occurs, or there is real evidence that our spouse is no longer as loving as he/she used to be, or we are facing an important challenge at work or in our social life where poor performance on our part is a real possibility, then again our minds will try to work out how to avoid a bad outcome.

If worrying is a natural response of the mind to disagreeable events that have happened or have some likelihood of happening, when is worry maladaptive? How much worry is too much worry? There is no absolute answer to this question, but there are some good general guidelines. While thinking about a past bad event might be natural shortly after it occurs, constantly thinking about it long afterwards is not adaptive for us. If there is nothing that can be done about the past, it is time to let go of it and get on with our life. While anticipating the future and planning ways to avoid bad events and to create good events are adaptive responses when faced with upcoming problems, constant thinking about negative possibilities is not useful. If our thinking is causing intense emotional distress and has been interfering with our daily functioning for some time and is not quickly or clearly providing solutions, worrying has become maladaptive.

In the case of "What if...?" worries, there is another useful guideline. Worry is natural only to the extent that the feared future event is really **likely** to happen. If a spot occurs on our skin, it may be adaptive to

have a physician take a look at it. "What if it is cancer?" may be an adaptive thought that leads to the adaptive response of seeing a physician. To worry about it very much in the meanwhile after making an appointment with the physician would be maladaptive, because the likelihood of actual cancer is low. To worry about it after the physician says that it is not cancer is even less adaptive, because the likelihood of cancer is then extremely low. So in general, worry is maladaptive if the things we worry about are not very likely to happen.

Even for future bad events that are quite likely to happen, worry may not be useful and will simply cause additional distress. This is the case when we have done all the problem-solving we can do before the event and there is nothing more to do about it. Of course it is natural for the mind to periodically be reminded about the upcoming event until it is over. But if we've done all we can reasonably do in preparation for it, to continue to allow ourselves to constantly think about it merely causes more distress and interference with the rest of our life in the meanwhile. So although the worrying here may be natural, it is not helpful, and applying methods to reduce it would be useful.

### **Worrying is a habit**

It is important to remember that worrying is a habit. A habit is something that is repeated involuntarily. Habits are developed because we have practiced doing them so often that we just start doing it without being aware that it has started. Worrying can become a mental habit. If worrying is a common problem for someone, it is partly because that person has done it a lot in the past. This fact will have some implications for how to reduce this habit.

### **Methods for reducing worry**

Fortunately, there are strategies that you can learn and practice that can be useful for reducing worry. Several methods are described below. But because worrying is a habit that has been well practiced, you should realize that it will take frequent practice of other courses of action, ones that are incompatible with worry, to reduce the habit of worrying. The more the methods are practiced, the stronger the new habit becomes, and the weaker the old habit of worry becomes. The new ways of coping that will become worry-replacing habits must be deliberately and voluntarily practiced often before the involuntary habit of worry diminishes. This will take some effort in the beginning. Additionally, it is important to realize that individual people are different from one another. Learning histories and personalities are in some ways unique, so the ways in which each person worries and the best ways for that person to learn to reduce his or her worrying may vary from person to person.

If we combine these notions (the need for often practicing worry-reduction methods and the uniqueness of each person) we can see that the best way to attempt to learn an effective way for reducing worry is to choose one of the described methods and to practice it. If after a few weeks of conscientious practice you do not notice a decline in your worrying, it is sensible to shift to a different method and to practice that for a while. The important point is to give a method a good try out before abandoning it and to realize that some methods work well for some types of worrying and others may be better for other types of worrying. Eventually, you can combine methods once you find which methods best suit you.

### **Observe your worrying: Catch it early**

Most of us, when we worry, are not even aware that it has started. That is the nature of habits. So fundamental to any method of worry reduction is to learn to become aware of our worrying. Begin by observing your worrying; become more aware of it; observing it with this goal in mind: to catch the worry as soon as it begins.

In applying any of these worry-reduction methods, the earlier it is applied (the earlier you can catch the worry), the more effective in the long run the method will be. This is because the longer an episode of worrying lasts, the more the habit is strengthened and the more you are strengthening the bonds between the specific worrisome thoughts in particular (the more you are strengthening the habit). So the earlier the worrying is detected and stopped, the less that habit is reinforced.

By becoming increasingly conscious of the habit of worrying, it is possible to a greater and greater degree to switch it off before it becomes obsessional. It is a good sign when you begin to recognize the start of a worry. You are approaching the position of being able to do something about it more effectively.

### **Count your worrying**

It is useful, in learning to observe your worrying, to keep track of how often it returns during a day. Making marks on a notepad (that you carry with you) or using a wrist-watch golf-counter would allow you to record this information. At the end of each day, write down the total and watch this trend over a

number of days. This procedure is helpful as a reminder (to observe and catch worrying), and it provides information on how much time you spend worrying. Later, as you begin practicing worry-reduction methods and continue to track the daily frequency of worrying, you'll be able to see what impact your methods are having on your worrying.

### **Limit worrying: The worry period**

Worrying can take place any time and in any place, and it can occur without anyone, even ourselves, being aware of it. Because of this, worrying can become associated with many times and many places. When some action is frequently associated with a particular place, returning to that place will tend to elicit the action in the future. That is, the place comes to remind us of the worrying, and so we start worrying again. In this way, worrying comes to be triggered at many times and places, until it goes on all day.

One useful strategy, then, is to practice limiting the occurrence of worry to just one place and one time of day. To do this, set up a 30 minute worry period. Choose a particular time and place for worrying. That time and place should always be the same time each day. Make the place unique, a place where you will only worry and where you will not do anything else. Choosing the kitchen table, or bed, or your favorite living room chair would not be a sensible idea. A chair placed in a corner of a room only during the worry period would be a better idea. It creates a unique environment which will only be associated with worry. Choose time that is convenient each day so that you are rarely busy with something else that might prevent you from using your worry period. Avoid choosing a time too close to bedtime; it is not sensible to associate worry with going to sleep!

There are several strategies that will be discussed for how you can use the worry period. But first we need to discuss some traditional methods to be used in conjunction with the worry period to make it effective.

### **Postpone worries to the worry period**

You have been observing your worries and have begun to practice catching them early. The next step is to postpone those worries to your worry period as soon as you become aware of them. When you catch the beginning of a worry, remind yourself that you will have time later on to think about that worry. There is no need to worry about it now. In fact, your worrying later during the worry period will likely lead to better solutions to the problem than doing it now, when you don't have the time and there are other things going on in your life that either require your attention or would be more pleasant to attend to than making yourself upset with your worrying. So postpone the worry. Write down the topic in case you are worried that you might forget the worry before you get to your worry period.

### **Attend to the immediate environment**

The next method to use in combination with worry-postponement is to focus your attention on the immediate environment or the task at hand. Remember, the events that we think about during worry don't exist right now, as we discussed earlier. So focus your attention back to what does exist right now. As you practice this, become increasingly aware of the difference between attending to what exists out there and attending to what doesn't actually exist except in our thoughts and images. And practice spending more and more time attending to what does exist.

Postponing a worry when it has been caught early and focusing attention on the immediate environment can help to reduce the frequency and duration of worry episodes. Each time these are practiced, the worry habit lessens in strength and alternative habits are being strengthened. But realize that old habits die hard. After postponing and focusing, the worry will try to intrude, often almost immediately. Just repeatedly follow the same procedure each time you catch it intruding. Immerse yourself in your immediate environment, and don't get discouraged if the worry continues to try to intrude. Additional methods for weakening the strength of the intrusion will be discussed later.

### **Use worry period for problem solving**

When you reach your worry period, there are several strategies that can be employed to make it particularly useful. Just the fact of the existence of such a worry period will make it possible to postpone worries during other times. But the worry period can also be used to start making dents (whittle away) in the strength of the worry. Use the worry period to list the worries you have and distinguish between those worries about which you can do something and those you cannot. For those worries about which you can do something, use the worry period for problem solving and decision making. What steps can you take to reduce the likelihood of the bad event happening? Is there information you can find that can give you a better estimate of the chances of such an event happening or information that can help you come up with a solution? Talk to someone about your concerns and

get their perspective on the reasonableness of the worry or possible solutions. Decide on some actions to take over the next few days that can reduce the likelihood of the bad event happening.

### **Cognitive restructuring**

You can also use the worry period to do some cognitive restructuring. This involves several steps:

- 1) Identify the specific thoughts that you have when you worry. What is it, exactly, that you are saying to yourself when you are worrying? Write these thoughts down. Your observation of those worries during the day should provide you with the material for this.
- 2) Now take each thought and logically analyze it. That is, what is the evidence for that thought? What is the probability of it happening? Has the event happened before? Is it reasonable or logical to predict that the event will happen, given the evidence? Even if the event happens, will you be able to handle it? What actions can you take to minimize its effects? Have you handled such situations in the past without terrible consequences? A year after the event, should the bad event happen, what difference will it make by then?
- 3) As you answer such questions, find those that indicate that the likelihood of things working out all right is good and that you would have ways of coping with the event if it happens. Create new thoughts from these and write them down next to the relevant worrisome thoughts you previously wrote down.
- 4) Use these new, more adaptive and reasonable thoughts whenever you catch one of the worrisome thoughts during the day. At first, the new thoughts may not feel true compared to the old worrisome thoughts. Just remind yourself that they are more true, based on your logical evidence-based analysis. They will, with repeated practice, start feeling more true as you frequently use them to replace the worrisome thoughts.
- 5) For some worries, it is useful during your worry period to ask, "What is the worst thing that could happen?" Sometimes it turns out not to be so terrible, that you would survive it, that you would be able to handle it and then move on with your life. The future is sometimes scary because it is unknown. By looking at known, likely possible futures, the future becomes less scary.

So the point of the worry period is to provide a way of postponing worrisome thinking from other times, to do what problem solving you can, to create ways of talking to yourself or seeing things that are more adaptive and reasonable and to use these newly created thoughts whenever you catch yourself worrying.

### **Relaxation methods for bodily disturbance**

The worry period steps suggested above are designed to help reduce worrisome thinking during the day. But worry can also create uncomfortable bodily sensations as well (e.g., muscle tension, stomach disturbance, heart pounding). As discussed before, imagining awful things can affect our bodies just as if these events were actually happening. These sensations, by the way, may be good clues to help you catch your worrisome thoughts earlier. Whenever you catch yourself worrying or feeling such sensations, you can replace these with a relaxation response to calm your body and make it easier to think more reasonably and clearly and to focus your attention better on your immediate environment. There are many types of relaxation methods, and you may find that one is better for you than another with some experimentation.

- 1) Practice a relaxing image. Picture a scene that creates a sense of calm and peacefulness (e.g., lying on a warm beach, sitting next to a brook in a beautiful valley, reclining in your favorite chair at home). Let go of all other thoughts and immerse yourself in this picture as if you were actually there.
- 2) Focus your attention on your breathing, every time you inhale and exhale. Say the word, "relax " or "calm" or any other word that is significant to you, upon each exhalation.
- 3) Deliberately tense up different groups of muscles for about 5 seconds, then release that tension all at once and concentrate for a minute on the feelings of relaxation that enter those muscles once they are released.
- 4) Breathe with your stomach, rather than your chest, and slow down your breathing to a comfortable rate.

With each of these techniques, you will notice thoughts intruding. Just let those thoughts pass through your mind (e.g., imagine the thoughts floating out of your head) and gently focus your attention back to the relaxation process. With practice, your ability to let go of thinking is likely to increase, making it easier to let go of worrisome thoughts during the day. You can practice such methods for 10-15 minutes twice a day, just to build up your ability to elicit a relaxation response, and then start using the relaxation response briefly whenever you catch yourself beginning to worry or notice bodily tension or upset.

### **Track the outcome of your worries**

There is one other piece of information that you can gather. During your worry period each day, write down every event that you are worrying about and list next to it the possible outcomes, good and bad, that might happen. Keep that list until the event actually happens and see which outcome occurred. Do this for every outcome that comes along and keep track of how often things actually turned out good, bad, or indifferent and whether you handled the outcome well or not well. Over time, you will be able to collect your own evidence about your worries and your ability to cope with events that you worry about. It is very likely that you will find that few things really turn out badly or that, even when they do, they don't have the terrible consequences that you imagine and you are quite capable of handling them well. Such evidence will increase your confidence in yourself and your trust that, whatever the future holds, you will be ready for it.

### **Seeking professional help**

The various methods described in this booklet were designed to help reduce normal worrying, the kinds of worrying most of us periodically find ourselves doing. It is important to realize that some worries for some people are caused by more severe conditions such as chronic anxiety or depression. While the suggested methods may be somewhat helpful for these conditions, they are unlikely to provide the kind of lasting relief that one desires. So if attempts to use these methods prove unsuccessful, it may be useful to seek professional help from a mental health practitioner who can provide a more systematic and comprehensive approach to help you overcome the problem.