

# How to stop worrying

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Most of us worry. We worry about major issues such as our health, children, ageing parents, or making ends meet or about minor matters, such as waking up early for work in the morning, getting to the shops before closing time or beating rush hour traffic.

Most people worry on a weekly basis, says Norman Warden, an accredited psychotherapist and the director of Galway Counselling Studies.

He says worrying can be defined as a chain of negative thoughts and images together with a state of anxiety and uncertainty over actual or potential problems. Or equally it can involve harassing oneself about things we cannot control which in turn causes anxiety.

“Worry may be focused on events, body sensations and the actual act of worrying itself (worry about worrying). We can view it along a continuum from concern - to worry - to excessive worry.

“Worrying can help us or hinder us. It can be useful if it makes us pay attention to something, if it is turned into a plan of action or if it helps us to be better prepared for life’s challenges and dangers. In that way, worry can be viewed as a problem-solving activity. On the other hand, worry without action is pointless. It can ruin our enjoyment, waste our time and keep us problem-focused without moving forward and leave us over focused on the negative possibilities in life.”

While we cannot remove the discomfort of worrying, like removing a program from a computer, we can learn to manage the process better, he says.

The activity of worrying involves some typical unhelpful thinking errors, he explains. These include fortune telling (predicting the future negatively), catastrophising (blowing things out of proportion), negative filtering (focusing on the negatives while ignoring any positives), seeing things in black and whites terms and emotional reasoning.

Emotional reasoning is when the anxious feeling and fear which accompanies worrying is misinterpreted as meaning that the situation is worse than it is.

“This reinforces the ‘realness’ of the worrying thoughts and increases the anxious feeling leading to a cycle of worrying - anxiety - worrying round and round. We call this ‘emotional reasoning’ ie, I feel anxious so

there must be danger. Just because I'm anxious it doesn't always follow that there is something to be anxious about. The more intense our emotions the more likely we will treat feelings (and thoughts) as facts and act accordingly. Feelings and thoughts are not facts but are information to be evaluated."

### Giving up our desire to control

Norman Warden says when we worry we focus on the 'what ifs' - the negative possibilities inherent in living and in the aspects of life over which we have no control.

"As Michel de Montaigne, the French philosopher put it: 'My life has been full of terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened'. This unproductive worrying, in focusing on possibilities rather than probabilities, encourages more worrying because anything is possible. This is the type of worry to let go of, and give up involving yourself in. Don't give it an audience. You may invite it into the room but don't give it a seat!"

To live a more worry-free life we need to focus on what we can influence and let go of what we cannot control, he advises.

"We can engage in unproductive (unsolvable) or productive (solvable) worrying. Productive worries tend to be in our control or influence and focused on what is probable and more likely to happen. A helpful exercise is to place your worries into two lists, one for the solvable and the other for the unsolvable worries. Tear off the unsolvable list, the 'what ifs', which will only lead to a sense of helplessness and anxiousness, and put it in the compost bin where it will be of more use! Then focus on the solvable worries list, the 'to do' list which can lead to a set of reasonable actions that you can take to deal with the worry."

### The To Do list

Worry is only useful when it spurs you into action, according to the psychotherapist. "1. Start by defining the problem, eg "My electricity and telephone bill are due but I don't have enough money to pay both." 2. List all possible solutions (you may need someone else to help with this) ie "Telephone the companies involved to see if you can spread the payments out" "I can survive without a phone but not the electricity" (prioritising); "Get a Credit Union loan" "Visit MABS." 3. Take action: List in order of preferences the easiest, most doable or relevant solutions. Draw on previous experiences of managing problems. What would someone I admire do? If you get stuck at the action stage, take your solution and list the advantages and disadvantages of each."

### Write down your worries

Put your worrying thoughts on paper. Keep a personal diary for this purpose. It helps to get those worrying thoughts out of your head so they can be viewed from a distance. Excessive worriers will benefit particularly from setting aside a regular fixed period of time (30 minutes) in a quiet place - not your bedroom as you do not want your mind to associate worry with sleep.

"As we often worry more at night it is good idea to have the worry session early evening to get the worries out of the head and aid sleep. During this time write down all the worries that are on your mind. Continue this process daily and consider questions such as: what am I worrying about? what am I feeling? What am I predicting? How much do I believe it will happen (0 to 100 per cent)? What is the evidence for my prediction? What is the evidence against my prediction?"

### Postpone your worries

When you find yourself worrying at any other times, briefly jot down the worry and tell yourself you will deal with it at the worry time period. It can be helpful to have a right margin titled 'action' where you state a basic action plan: "I'll make an appointment with MABS tomorrow to discuss how I manage finances." This helps appease your mind and aid sleep, he says.

“After you have been practising worry time for a while you’ll find that it gives you more of a sense of control over your worries. You’ll begin to realise that you can actually learn to put off your worries and that they are often repetitive - the same thoughts over and over, often nothing new or urgent.”

### Turn worries into predictions

Many worries are expressed in vague terms. By restating worries in terms of, what you are predicting is going to happen, it makes it easier to challenge them. The aim is to test out how much your predictions and therefore worries are reality based or based on the intensity of your feeling only (emotional reasoning).

“Let’s say you are worried about not meeting a deadline at work. Prediction: “If I miss the deadline I’ll get sacked”. How likely is it that what I am predicting will happen (0 to 100 per cent)? “55 per cent chance”. What is the worst that could happen? “I’ll get fired”. What is the best that could happen? “I’ll meet the deadline and get some praise from my boss”. What is the most likely thing that will happen? “I’ll get it done on time and the quality of my work will be good enough”. How helpful is it for me to worry about this? “Not helpful at all as it makes it harder to focus on the task and I could be enjoying doing it”. If the worst did happen, what would I be able to do to cope? (how have I coped in previous crisis times?). “I would survive perhaps might find work abroad, gain experience and see a different country”. How else could I view this situation and what would be a more balanced and helpful thought to replace my worry? “I’ve managed this before reasonably OK, it doesn’t have to be perfect and people in my workplace don’t tend to get fired for such a thing. Worrying about this to this degree is unhelpful”. How much do I now believe my prediction (0 to 100%)?”

### Put your worries in perspective

He recommends using the five year rule: How much will this matter in five years time? Ask yourself: Where on a scale of bad experiences would you rate the issue you are worried about? How does it compare to a bad experience you have had? How much worry is this worth? Does this worry warrant that much time and energy? Make sure you do not spend more worry on this problem than its worth.

He advises uses distractive activities to divert your mind away from worrisome thoughts, such as an attention absorbing sport, a compelling film, powerful music, or learn the techniques of mindfulness. Mindfulness involves focusing your attention on the micro details of your breathing, the movement, sounds and sensations in the present moment. This helps you learn the skill of observing your thoughts and feelings from an distance and to not become too attached to them, as happens with unhelpful worrying.

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