

Five Strategies to Reduce Excessive Worry

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Given natural disasters, school violence, unemployment, deployment, the fiscal cliff, the flu, erratic weather patterns and tax changes, there are plenty of things to worry about. Everyone worries. The question is how much?

Worry is the negative thinking we do when we are faced with a real or anticipated threat. It is the “thinking” component of the physical heart racing, shallow breathing and sweaty palms that make up anxiety. “What if I lose my job?” “What if we are hit with another storm? What if something happens to my child?”

Whereas a certain degree of worry may prompt us to plan ahead, ask for help, or change behavior patterns, experts tell us that [excessive worry is toxic](#).

What Causes Excessive Worry

The common misconception that fuels excessive worry is the belief that worry actually accomplishes something positive: *“I want to be ready when the other shoe drops.”*

The Impact of Excessive Worry

- In reality, excessive worry is not only ineffective as a strategy; but often sets in motion a vicious cycle of paralysis, poor problem solving and fear of coping which in turn escalates more worry.
- Physically, excessive worry is costly. It trips the release of stress hormones, disrupts sleeping and eating patterns and often compromises the immune system.
- Overall, spending time “anticipating the worst” debilitates rather than prepares us for what may or may not happen.

Five Ways to Reduce Toxic Worry

Worry need not become a toxic cycle that takes more than it gives. Here are six strategies that wind down toxic worry:

Reconsider and Refocus

Are you worrying about “What if” or “What is?” Most excessive worry is about ‘What if’ – something that we have *no proof* will ever happen. Keeping you focus and energy on addressing ‘what is’ is not only more realistic but more likely to positively impact your life.

From Thought to Action

As a rule of thumb, if we are acting out too much, it makes sense to start thinking and if we are thinking too much, it makes sense to start acting.

Accordingly, another valuable strategy for reducing worry is to move from thought to action. No matter how small, the very move from rumination to movement can have an impact on disrupting a worry cycle.

- Instead of worrying yourself “sick” about the call to your doctor to get test results – make the call.
- Instead of laying in bed worrying about what you need to do the next day – get up, write a list and then “sleep on it.”
- Instead of worrying about being laid off, take any step toward considering training or additional work opportunities.
- When there seems nothing *to do* but worry, some people *do something* different. Be it meditation, exercise or prayer, doing something different to reduce worry.

Share and Air

- One of the most powerful antidotes to excessive worry is connection to others.
- The very act of sharing lowers anxiety because it moves the worrier from internal fears to verbalized expression. Just “airing” it, can invite a more realistic perspective.
- There is also a tendency to become less vigilant and to worry less– when someone else knows your concern.
- When spouses and children tell partners and parents their worries, they are often asking for someone to hold them. It lightens the emotional load.
- Sharing also helps because it is difficult to stay locked into a loop of excessive worry when someone else interrupts the thinking with a different perspective or additional information.

“Yes I am frightened about the kids going on school trips or traveling abroad but should we let our fears lock them out of life experiences?”

Postpone Worry

- Few people benefit from the suggestion “Stop worrying!”
- Whereas dismissing the worry may not be realistic, **postponing worry** has proven helpful to many.

Choosing *when* to worry puts you in charge. It gives you the psychological space and time to do something else or think of something else. This brings down the anxiety and often affords a more realistic appraisal when you do think about it.

- *Many people worry at night when they are most exhausted, their defenses are down, they feel regressed and nothing seems possible. Many find that postponing worry until morning is invaluable. (Some write it down—so they move it from mind to paper)*
- *In the light of day many find that both the cause for worry, much less the need for solutions has dramatically changed.*

Set up a “worry time”

- In the face of worry that just won’t stop, [Edna Foa](#) recommends a continual plan of systematic postponement and a designated “worry time” to disrupt and dilute the pattern.

- Once you postpone your worry, it is helpful “to do” something else. Very often time spent in other activities begins to occupy your attention and reduce your anxiety. It is sometimes a surprise to the worrier that they have become so engrossed in a new positive activity — they *forgot to worry*.

Changing Our Inner Dialogue

- Fueling the loop of worry is often the voice of a vulnerable or traumatized self that can't access or remember personal strengths and coping skills.
- Many of us at some point get can get trapped enough in worry to ask: “*What would I do?*” “*What if my decision is wrong?*” “*How will it turn out?*” “*Should I be doing more to help?*”
- Consciously challenging a frightened inner dialogue by thinking about the story of your life and connecting with a stronger surviving self can re-enforce a positive perspective and change the dialogue.

Consider the power of these internal statements on reducing excessive worry:

- “I can change my mind if it doesn't work.”
- “I could go on worrying but this is not my problem.”
- “I usually find a way to cope – even if it gets difficult.”
- “I don't need the answer now.”
- “When I need to deal with it – I will.”

While there is always a reason to worry, there is never a reason to worry to a degree that obscures the possible and the positive in any day we are given.