

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
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Coping with Worry



I have heard people say – mostly men – “I don’t worry ‘bout nuthin’”! I am very happy for them, if it is true. Few of us are that fearless. Yes, fearless, for worry is a very special form of fear.

How do we create worry? We take a dose of fear, then we stretch it out with anticipation in our memory; then we let our imagination run wild, and then we let it take over our emotions. Yes, worry is merely basic, instinctual fear that we run through our mind until it becomes a very complex thought. Since we accomplish nothing with this thought continuously running through our mind, we feel powerless, and very vulnerable to the unknown.

Worry is our built in warning system that goes into a cycle that troubles us and can dominate our thoughts and emotions until we somehow overcome it. Sometimes it is making a mountain out of a molehill. An old Swedish proverb says that “worry gives small things a big shadow.”

Sometimes, but not usually, worry can be helpful, in that it protects us or reminds us to get the job done. That usually ends the worry. More often than not however, worry doesn’t help us, doesn’t protect us or our loved ones, and doesn’t make things better or change situations.

There is a difference in the way we are “hard-wired” at birth, according to some researchers, so that some of us are more prone to cycling these negative thoughts back and forth to different parts of our brain. Some actually seek things about which to worry, so they can ruminate on them, the way a cow chews his cud repetitively.

There are many ways in which we worry. Most of us hate uncertainty, and when we are faced with a situation where we don’t know the outcome, we think about it a great deal, hoping to find an answer. Of course this makes us just feel uncomfortable, so we continue trying to make sense of what is basically, the unknowable. We feel that it is our responsibility to know what will happen, and feel guilty if we cannot predict or control events. If we expect that a situation may be dangerous, then we often wrongly feel that it IS dangerous; we come to believe that it is up to us to be on top of things, to be in charge and in control.

If we worry about our loved ones then we feel that we are good friends, siblings, children, or parents. Because we even have these thoughts, we feel that they are very important ones and we must persist in them.

Friends tell us not to worry, and we say, “OK”, but this just makes us worry more. They reassure us that everything is alright; this works very briefly but it also encourages us to seek reassurance from others whenever we worry. We must try other ways of lowering our worries. Telling ourselves to stop worrying usually makes us think even more about our concerns.

Sometimes, prayer helps, but if not, it can test our faith. It is better to pray for guidance in easing our concerns, rather than praying for things to turn out the way you want them. If they don't, the results can shake our beliefs.

Worrying can hurt our ability to sleep, and then we worry about insomnia as well. We need to realize that our fear of uncertainty is often worse than what we are worrying about. Worrying about getting cancer, for example, is often more stressful on the body than some forms of cancer themselves.

There are ways of dealing with worry. Try to accept that you have worries and that you must not take them so seriously. If they can be dealt with by taking positive and thoughtful action – and not some mindless lashing out – then go ahead and resolve your conflict if you can. If you cannot resolve the issue, stop indulging yourself in it like a person who needs to have a piece of chocolate or a drink of whisky, or a pill.

Some people establish a daily “worry period” which they save to fret over whatever they are ruminating about at the moment. Save those worries for this period and indulge yourself. There are certain techniques, called mindfulness meditation, that allow us to become an observer of our worrying process rather than a participant. See the internet link below for an article.

Some worry is part of certain disorders such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic attacks, and social phobias. Cognitive therapy, from a qualified counselor or other therapist can help. Here you will examine the twisted thinking you engage in that feeds your worry – the irrational beliefs, the need to control, to be liked and accepted by everyone, to be free of pain and discomfort at all times, to be competent in everything, at all times. This is not possible for anyone, and it is time that you learn to accept this. The world is never predictable, life is always full of uncertainties, and no matter how good we are or how hard we try, life isn't always fair to us. That has always been the way of this wonderful world, filled with so many blessings and so much goodness.

There are other ways of controlling our minds and bodies, through various forms of relaxation techniques, breathing methods, meditation, inspirational reading, prayer, yoga, exercise, dance, painting, music, and other art forms. Use your

sense of humor and seek out humor and humorous people. Read a good book, keep a diary or just write stories or poems. Cultivate healthy relationships with good people. Avoid stimulants, such as caffeine or nicotine products, or stronger, illicit ones. Avoid relying on alcohol or other drugs to forget about your worries. Don't run from your worries in a cowardly fashion. Face and overcome them yourself without a pill or drug or drink or overeating.

Take a long walk everyday, or do other strenuous exercise, and while you do, focus on the here-and-now. Don't "catastrophize" – meaning imagining things worse than they really are. Can you really control the things you are worrying about BY worrying about them? Is the risk of danger or disaster so great as to merit this worry? Will this be important in the future? In the grand scheme of your life, it is probably a great big NOTHING that is dominating your life.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell once said, "imagine how happy you'd be if you lost everything you have right now... and then got it all back."

Website of the week: <http://www.inquiringmind.com/Articles/JonKabat.html>

Tip of the week: Recent studies have shown that people who feel attached to a religion, particularly going to church, mosque, or synagogue, may protect them from attempting suicide, although it does not stop them from considering it.