How to Reduce Worrying

Fortunately, there are strategies that you can learn and practice that can be useful for reducing worry. 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. This will take some effort in the beginning.

Additionally, it is important to realize that what works for one person may not work for another. Because each person is unique, the way in which he or she worries, and the best ways for that person to learn to reduce his or her worrying, may vary.

The most effective way to reduce worry is to choose a method and 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 before abandoning it, and to realize that while some methods work well for some types of worrying, others may be better for other types of worrying. You can try combining methods until you find which combination works best for you.

Observe Your Worrying And Catch It Early

Most of us, when we worry, are not even aware that it has started. That is the nature of habits. That’s why learning to become aware of your worrying is fundamental to any method of worry reduction. Begin by observing your worrying: Become more aware of it; observe it with the goal in mind of catching the worry as soon as it begins.

In applying any of these worry-reduction methods, the earlier it is applied, in other words 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. In other words, you are reinforcing the habit. So, the earlier the worrying is caught, the less that habit is strengthened.

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 obsessive. It is a good sign when you are consciously catching the worrying early. You are approaching the position of being able to do something about it more effectively.

Count Your Worrying

In learning to observe your worrying, it is useful to keep track of how often it occurs during the day.

- Making marks on a notepad (that you carry with you) or using a wristwatch 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 you to observe and catch worrying. It also 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.

Limit Worrying With The Worry Period

Worrying can take place any time and in any place, and it can occur without you even being aware of it. Because of this, worrying can become associated with many times and many places.

When some action like worrying 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 you of the worrying, so you 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, ideally, 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 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, because you go to those places often. A chair placed in a corner of a room only during the worry period would be a better idea. It creates a unique environment that will only be associated with worry.
- Choose a 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 discussed below for how you can use the worry period, and some traditional methods to be used in conjunction with the worry period to make it effective.

Postpone Worry 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.
- 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 worrying.

So, postpone the worry. Write down the topic in case you are worried that you might forget it before you get to your worry period.

Attend To The Immediate Environment

The next method to use in combination with postponement is to focus your attention on the immediate environment or the task at hand. Remember, the events that you think about during worry don’t exist right now. So focus your attention back to what does immediately exist.

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 your thoughts and images. 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
strengthened.

However, you should realize that old habits are hard to break. 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.

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.

The worry period can also be used to start whittling away 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.
Try 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?

3. 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 it happen, what difference will it make by then?

4. 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.

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 ring true compared to the old worrisome thoughts. Just remind yourself that they are 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 and as you catch them earlier and earlier.

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 and 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
- Do what problem solving you can
- Create ways of talking to yourself or seeing things that are more adaptive and reasonable
- Use these newly created thoughts whenever you catch yourself worrying

Relaxation Methods For Bodily Disturbance

The worry period steps are designed to help reduce worrisome thinking during the day. But worry can also create uncomfortable bodily sensations as well, such as muscle tension, stomach disturbance, and a pounding heart.

Imagining awful things can affect our bodies just as if they were actually happening. These sensations 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.

Track The Outcome Of Your Wories

There is one other useful piece of information that you can gather. During your worry period each day:

- Write down every event that you're 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.
Over time, you will be able to collect your own evidence about your worries and your ability to cope with events that you worried about. It is very likely that you will find that few things really turn out badly or that, even when they do, you are capable of handling them quite 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 above can help reduce normal worrying, the kinds of worrying most of us periodically find ourselves doing. It is important to realize that for some people, worries are caused by more severe conditions such as chronic anxiety or depression.

In this case, these methods may be somewhat helpful for these conditions but are unlikely to provide lasting relief. 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.

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