

## How to Reduce Worry



Worrying bothers almost everyone from time to time. 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. This process can be adaptive (i.e., helpful), to help us learn from our mistakes, make sense of our environment, and try to predict our world. Healthy concern can motivate us to create solutions to problems, plan strategies, and prepare for challenges.

**Message:** Some worry is healthy and can motivate us to solve our problems!

However, at times our mind can start to race and get stuck in a pattern of worry. These worried thoughts might be characterized by phrases such as “If only...” or “What if..?”

“If only...” – We may recall past events which we regret or that were sad at the time they happened. The event may have left us with an unresolved emotional feeling, and under these circumstances our mind continues to try to resolve it. This “past thinking” can contribute to depressed mood. And, unfortunately, because the event has already happened, nothing can be done. We cannot go back in the past and miraculously have the event turn out differently.

**Message:** “If only...” thoughts leave us stuck in the past and contribute to depression.  
We cannot change the past.

“What if...?” -- We may find ourselves thinking about all sorts of future events that might happen and we can list a million ways in which something might go wrong. These thoughts can form a “chain” and start to race out of control:

What if I hurt my back again? What if I run out of money and can't pay my bills? What if my spouse someday should no longer love me? What if my doctor changes my medication again? What if I make a mistake and everyone thinks I'm stupid because of it? What if I can't return to work at my full 100%?

Each of these is a possible future event. We can't really predict the exact likelihood that any of these will happen. We don't know exactly how we would cope or survive if the situation did happen. This “future thinking” can be anxiety-provoking.

“What if...?” thinking is our mind's attempt to gain some control over the future. The future is sometimes scary because it is unknown. Maybe if we think about and prepare for all of the possibilities, we won't get surprised or taken off guard. But, this is a false sense of control. Just the action of worrying will not solve a problem or change the likelihood of something bad happening.

**Message:** “What if...?” thoughts get us stuck in the future and  
can lead to anxiety about possible negative events.  
We cannot predict the likelihood that these events will actually happen.

**Message:** Worrying about the future does not automatically change the future!

### 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 before we even notice. The habitual behavior may have worked well for us in the past. Unfortunately, after a while the habitual behavior stops working as well and may cause distress or interference in our daily behavior. But, we keep responding in the way we know best. We may forget other ways to respond to a situation. Worrying can become a mental habit. Just like learning to stop biting your fingernails, we can learn to break the worrying habit.

**Message:** Good thing...habits can be broken.

### Ways to reduce worry

Each time we have such thoughts, our bodies react just as if the event were actually happening or about to happen. These thoughts and feelings may be hard to ignore. The harder we try to ignore them or erase them from our minds, the more they seem to pop back into focus!

Fortunately, there are strategies you can learn and practice to help reduce worry. One way to do this is to replace your worry habit with an alternate action that is incompatible with worry (e.g., you cannot be relaxed AND tense at the same time). Because worrying is a habit that has been well practiced, you should realize that it will take frequent practice of alternative actions to reduce your worry habit.

The more these methods are practiced, the stronger the new habit will become 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. This will take some effort in the beginning.

**Message:** This might take awhile. Give these worry-replacing strategies a really good try.  
Practice makes perfect!

### Strategy #1: Promote the relaxation response

Worry can create uncomfortable bodily sensations (e.g., muscle tension, stomach disturbance, heart racing). Whenever you catch yourself worrying or whenever you feel such bodily sensations, you can replace these with a relaxation response to calm your body and make it easier to think reasonably and clearly and to focus your attention better on your immediate environment. There are many types of relaxation methods, many of which you have learned or will learn in the program. You may find that one is better for you than another with some experimentation. Begin each relaxation session in a comfortable position with a few minutes of deep, slow, regular diaphragmatic breathing (breathe with your stomach rather than your chest).

You may want to try a meditation technique called “**mindfulness.**” This technique encourages you to let your mind stay passively focused on the pain. Allow yourself simply to *observe* the pain, feelings, and thoughts you may have, without running away from those feelings or thoughts. Say something to yourself to acknowledge what you’re experiencing, like, “Oh, yes, that’s my pain” or “That’s my worry.” Then return to your relaxation technique in the present. If you stop fighting against your pain and worry, and you just observe it, you may start to understand that the way you choose to feel about your pain and the way you choose to solve your problems is under your control.

**Message:** Try several relaxation techniques to calm the body's worry response and choose the one that works best for you.

**Message:** Your pain and your worry do not have to control you.  
Your response is your *choice*.

Strategy #2: Create a worry period/Limit your worry

Worrying can take place at any time and in any place, and it can occur without anyone being aware of it. Because of this, worrying can become associated with many times and many places. When an action is frequently associated with a particular place (e.g., bed), 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, worry comes to be triggered at many times and places until it goes on all day.

One useful strategy 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 (note: you may not need a full 30 minutes). Here are the steps:

1. Set up a time and place
  - The time and place should be the same every day
  - **Only** for worry, not for anything else
  - In a unique environment
    - Favorite chair, kitchen table, or bed would NOT be a good choice
    - Perhaps set up a chair placed in a corner of the room for use only during your worry period
  - Not too close to bedtime
    - Choose a time of day that is convenient so you don't get busy or forget it
  
2. Postpone worries to the worry period
  - When you catch worries starting throughout the day – remind yourself that you have time later on to think about the worry.
    - Say to yourself, “I can think about this later” or “I can worry about this later when I can devote better attention to it.”
  - Know that you will have better solutions later when you have a dedicated time to focus. **Postpone the worry.**
  - Write the topic down if you think you'll forget
  
3. Then, **return your focus to the immediate environment!**
  - The events we think about during the worry do not exist right now (remember, worry is usually past- or future-thinking). Focus instead on what does exist right now, your immediate five senses, your immediate surroundings and feelings, your current actions or task.
  - After postponing and focusing, the worry may try to intrude, often almost immediately. “Old habits die hard.” Don't get discouraged if the worry continues to pop back in your head. Just repeatedly follow the same procedure each time you catch it intruding.

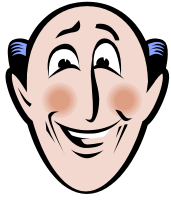
**Message:** To break the worry habit, we must break the connection between worry and our environmental cues.

**Message:** Create a limited time period and find a unique place to worry. Allow yourself to postpone your worries to this “worry period” and then focus your attentions back on your immediate environment.

4. During your worry period

- Even just the existence of the worry period can help you postpone your thoughts and reduce the frequency of worry. But, you can *use this time constructively, too*.
- Use this time to start making dents in the strength of the worry.
  - List the worries you have been saving up
  - Distinguish between the worries about which you can do something and those you cannot:

Worries <b>I can do something</b> about	Worries <b>I can't</b> actively <b>resolve now</b>
<p><b>ACTION:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem-solve</li> <li>• Make decisions</li> </ul> <p><b>How to:</b> Ask yourself --</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What steps can I take to reduce the likelihood of the bad event happening?</li> <li>• Is there information I can gather to help me know more about the problem?</li> <li>• What are some ways I can resolve the problem? <b>BRAINSTORM</b> solutions!</li> <li>• Can I talk to someone about my concerns and get their perspective on the reasonableness of the worry or possible solutions.</li> <li>• Decide on concrete and appropriate actions to take over the next few days that can reduce the likelihood of the bad event happening.</li> <li>• Doing something about the problem gives you control over it. <i>Real</i> control, not the false control that worrying suggests.</li> </ul>	<p><b>ACTION:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cognitive Restructuring</li> </ul> <p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly identify your specific thoughts. What are you saying to yourself or imagining when you worry?</li> <li>• Take each thought and logically analyze it. Ask yourself --                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What is the evidence for that thought?</li> <li>○ What is the probability of it happening?</li> <li>○ Has the event happened before?</li> <li>○ Is it reasonable to predict that the event will happen again, given real evidence?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• As you answer such questions, find answers that indicate a good likelihood of things working out all right. Find answers that show you that you'd have ways of coping with the event if it happens.</li> <li>• Create new thoughts from these and write them next to the worrisome thought you wrote down before.</li> <li>• Use these new, more adaptive and reasonable thoughts whenever you catch one of the worrisome thoughts during the day. Over time and with practice, these new thoughts will start feeling more true.</li> </ul>



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 move on with your life.

**Message:** The point of the worry period is to --

- \* provide a way of postponing worrisome thinking from other times of day,
  - \* do what problem solving you can,
  - \* create ways of talking to yourself or seeing things that are more reasonable and adaptive, & \*
  - use these newly created thoughts whenever you catch yourself worrying.
- You **can** take control of your worry!