

What is Productive Worry?

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If you are a chronic worrier you have probably gotten some of this useless advice: “Don’t worry”, “It will all work out” or “You need to believe in yourself”. Worriers seldom find this well-meaning advice to be helpful. In fact, they often find it to be invalidating and they think, “You don’t understand how hard it really is for me.” Or you might think, “It must be really hopeless, if this is the only advice people give me.”

You may have a mixed mind about your worry. You feel it’s “driving me crazy”, but you also think you get something from your worry. Worriers believe that their worry can help them prepare, avoid surprise, or get motivated. You may not be entirely wrong. Like any [anxious](#) thought there is some truth in the idea that worry can—to some extent--- prepare you, help you avoid surprises, and motivate you. But the real question is, “How will worry help?” And, “When is it useless?”

I find it useful to distinguish between productive and unproductive worry. Let’s suppose that I am going to Washington, D.C. for a meeting. What is “productive worry”? Well, let’s think of productive worry as a worry that I can turn into an action plan TODAY where this action can reasonably help me solve a problem. So, productive worry could be the following actions: “Get a reservation on the train, get a hotel reservation, bring your flash drive with your power-point presentation, and give yourself enough time to get to the train station.” All of these are actions that I can take TODAY. I can actually do something. So, productive worry is a TO-DO LIST FOR TODAY.

Let’s imagine that you are worried about your health. You notice that you have aches and pains that are unusual for you. You begin thinking, “I wonder if I have cancer”. You form visions in your mind of getting sicker and sicker. You are plagued by “what-ifs?”---such as, “What if the doctor doesn’t diagnose me correctly?” and “What if it’s too late?” It would be foolish to say to you, “Don’t worry, you’re OK.” We don’t know that you are OK. So, what is productive worry? Call your doctor and make an appointment for an exam. Productive worry is prudent action.

Or, let’s imagine that you have an exam coming up next week. You are worried and you

think, “What if I fail? What if I get thrown out of school? What if I end up homeless? What if my [parents](#) disown me for letting them down?” All of these “what-ifs” are unproductive worries. They are unproductive because you can’t do anything today to solve the problem. Since you haven’t taken the exam, you don’t know if you are going to pass. You don’t have to solve the problem of being homeless today because you have a home today. You don’t have to solve problems that don’t exist. Unproductive worry is about what-ifs that you can’t do anything about. But there are some productive actions that you can take about the exam. You can study. You can set aside time tonight and the night after and prepare.

The first thing I ask people to think about when they are worried is this, “Is there some productive action that you can take today that will help you solve the problem?” If so, make a to-do list and start taking action. Once you take action, you won’t be worried. If your taxes are late, rather than worry about them, start preparing your taxes over the next day. Take action and get out of your head.

In the next blog, I’ll tell you what you can do with all of those unproductive worries. The good news is that we have a lot of techniques that you can use.

Now, ask yourself, “What is the productive action that I can take?” If there is none, then you will have to learn how to accept some limitation and some uncertainty. This won’t be easy to do, but we will go over this in this blog.

Now, get to work!

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