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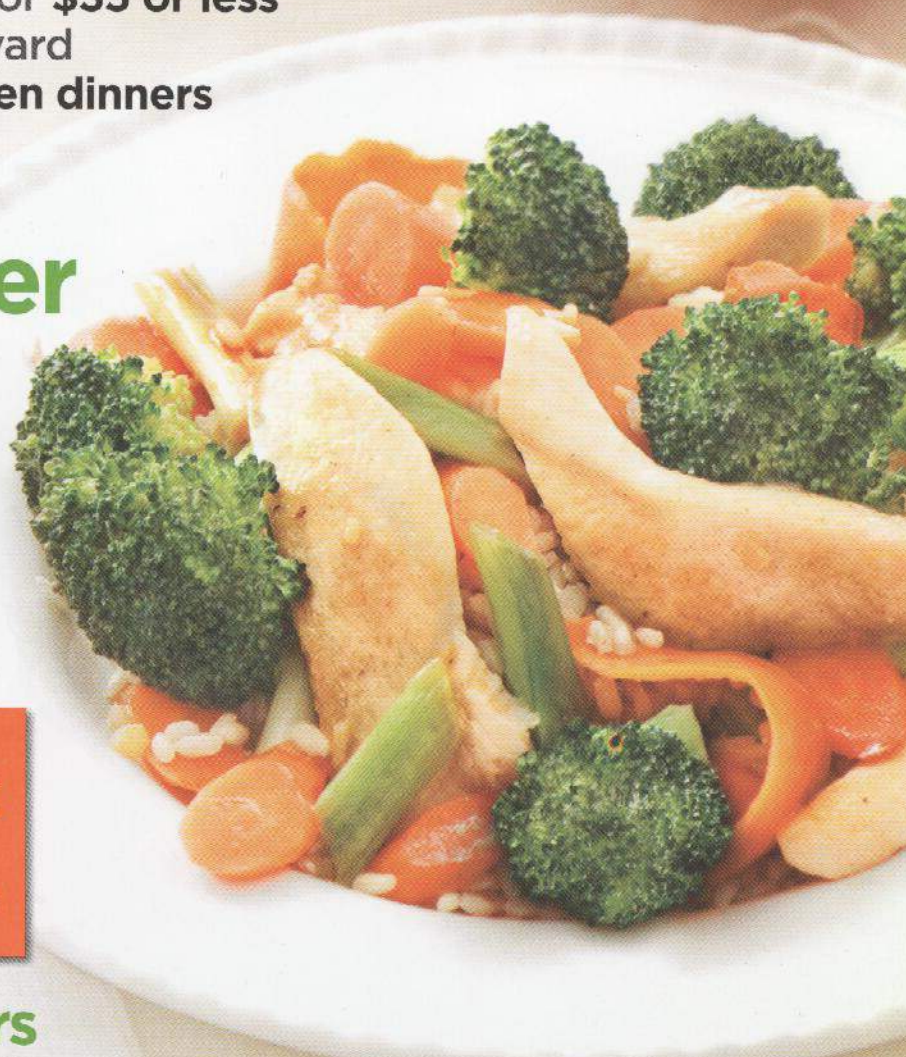
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STAYING CENTERED, COPING, LIVING FULLY



The Worry Cure

Hitting the panic button only makes things worse. Here are nine smart ways to cope with your fears

By Susan Crandell

41%
of women
polled on the
GH Web site
worry most
about
money

I am a habitual worrywart. If I don't have something substantial to stew about, I'll inflate a minor issue—like an anxiety blowup doll. I can lie awake for hours ruminating about what results I'll get from a critical medical test, but I can also spin my mental wheels fretting that I bought the wrong size lasagna pan. And at 3 A.M., such disparate causes mysteriously provoke equivalent agonies.

Whether you're an inveterate worrier like me or someone who rarely loses sleep over those nagging thoughts, the →

current economy is serving up more than enough category-five, big-deal concerns to have us all chewing our fingernails: Can I make the mortgage payments? Is my job secure? Will I ever be able to afford to retire? It's open season for the entire nation to join me in my wee-hours obsessing. But if you have fallen victim to this hamster wheel, take heart. Even in times as troubling as these, experts say, there are ways to ease your worried mind.

For starters, it's important to understand that although worry may make you feel anxious and overwrought, it's not actually a feeling at all. Rather it's a thought process in which you focus on a problem, either

"It's not the cause of your worry but your confidence that you'll handle it that counts"

real or perceived. Chronic worry, the type I specialize in, leaves your mind revisiting the same issues over and over, with no solution in sight and no exit ramp. "Toxic worry" is what Edward M. Hallowell, M.D., author of *Worry*, has dubbed it, or "the infinite web of 'what if.'"

But not all worrying is bad. That first flicker can be constructive, says Steven Craig, Psy.D., a psychologist in Birmingham, MI, if it identifies a threat and leads to problem-solving, goal setting, and acceptance of your limits. When worry sounds a wake-up call to a difficulty that we proceed to resolve, it's productive rather than toxic, and finite rather than chronic. For example, faced with a shrunken college savings account that won't cover your daughter's tuition next year, you could become paralyzed by fears concerning her future and obsessed with the thought that she'll

end up dropping out. That's toxic worry. Productive worry prods you to consider the situation differently: How can you address the problem? By researching scholarships and loans? Encouraging your daughter to get a part-time job or even transfer to a less expensive school?

There's no final word on why we worry: Nature, nurture, and of course opportunity all play roles—and it's easy to see how productive worry could serve a useful evolutionary function. But the sneaky thing about chronic worry, says Alan D. Keck, Psy.D., director of the Center for Positive Psychology in Altamonte Springs, FL, is that it can masquerade as constructive action. "When

you worry, you think you're doing something productive," says Keck, "but you're not; you're just spinning your wheels."

Even natural-born non-worriers and people with good coping skills can be affected by the endless stream of alarming news nowadays, and toxic worriers like me are likely to be overwhelmed. But, fortunately, worrying doesn't have to be a life sentence without parole, according to Dr. Hallowell. "I'm living proof—I used to be a toxic worrier, but there are simple techniques that really help," he says. Some of your worries can be converted from toxic to productive. Other more cosmic concerns, like whether the unemployment rate will top 10 percent this year, are beyond your control—but you can learn not to dwell on them. Hence the Serenity Prayer's plea for "the serenity to accept the things I

cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference." Read on for help in doing just that.

Give in to worry... but only for 20 minutes, recommends Keck. Every day, set aside this time to focus on whatever is troubling you—and don't even try to problem-solve or be productive. "Think, fret, obsess, stew," Keck urges. "And when your time's up, stop. After several weeks of practicing this release, your worry will gradually recede." Virginia Briguglio, a mother of three who lives outside Atlanta, takes this one step further. "When I'm worried and stressed, I let myself indulge in a good cry," she says. "I go somewhere by myself, sob for 15 minutes, and get the 'woe is me' out of my system. Then I turn my attention to figuring out what I need to do to solve the problem."

Nobody knows exactly why this works, but Keck theorizes that it's like trying not to think about a pink elephant. If you attempt to ignore something that's upsetting you, the thought is likely to come back, stronger and stronger. Paying attention to your worries in a structured, time-limited way satisfies that demand for attention and helps to discipline your mind.

Accept uncertainty "Say there's a chance you'll lose your job. You



could obsess over how, when, and why, figuring all the ways you might get laid off," says Robert L. Leahy, author of *Anxiety Free: Unravel Your Fears Before They Unravel You*. "If you simply say, 'I will accept the possibility and get on with my life,' and mean it, you can move on to take productive steps." The goal is to proceed to problem-solving instead of remaining mired in worry.

That's a tall order for many of us, so to help, Leahy advocates mindfulness meditation: focusing on observing your breathing without

py can improve your attitude, studies suggest. This is because thought, emotion, and actions are interconnected; changing your behavior by acting carefree alters your thoughts and feelings, too.

Focus on the day-to-day Ask yourself, for example, whether the economic meltdown has significantly changed how you go about your day. Chances are you do many of the same things and see many of the same people—even if not coworkers, there's still the mail carrier, the crossing guard, buddies at the gym. Maintaining the

"Imagine your worry floating down a stream so slowly you can hardly see it moving"

trying to control it. "Imagine your worry floating down a stream on a piece of wood, so slowly you can hardly see it moving. Don't try to influence it, just watch as it gently drifts." Visualization short-circuits the cognitive treadmill of worry. That's how, during seven years of infertility, Cheryl Butler, now a busy stay-at-home mother of eight in Saunderstown, RI, learned to banish her worries about conceiving. "My sanity saver was sitting by the water and watching the waves," she says. "As they ebbed, I imagined my troubles traveling with them. As they came in, they represented cleansing, a chance to start fresh." (She ultimately adopted a daughter, and then went on to bear seven babies.)

Act unconcerned Pretending that you're not worried can help make it so. "Changing your behavior will affect your thoughts and emotions," Keck says. "Research shows that if you tell one group to smile while another doesn't, the smilers will feel better." Even just trying to look hap-

py can improve your attitude, studies suggest. This is because thought, emotion, and actions are interconnected; changing your behavior by acting carefree alters your thoughts and feelings, too.

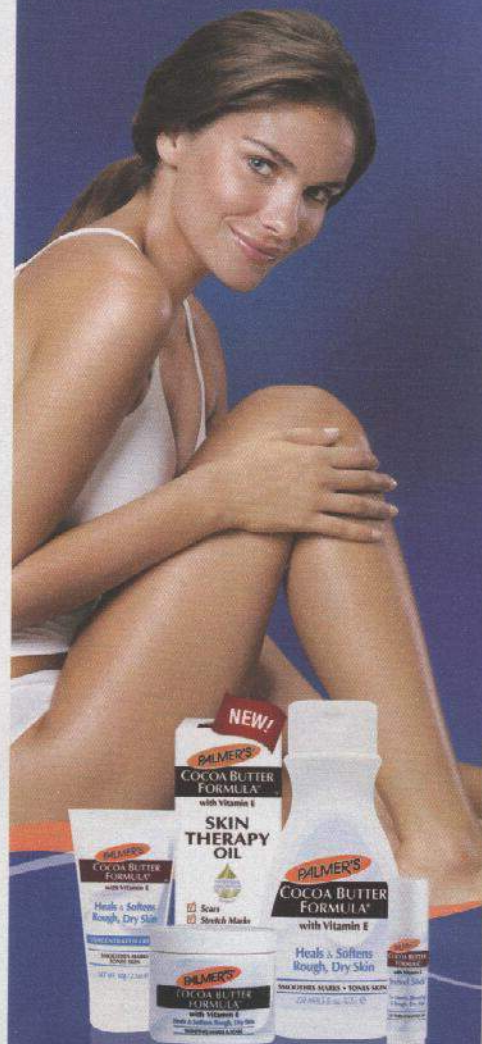
Don't catastrophize worry If you're feeling anxious, you're more likely to expect the worst, and to underestimate your ability to cope if things go badly. Better to emulate Tiger Woods. "When he tees up in front of millions, chances are he's nervous, however cool he may seem. But he's coping," says Craig. "Everyone worries: It's not the cause but your confidence that you can handle it that counts." How to raise confidence? By proving to yourself you can deal with adversity.

Practice problem solving Make the effort to seek out solutions, even when things seem hopeless. Writing a description of the issues helps →

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define them; doing the same with potential remedies lets you assess and refine them. Brainstorming with family and friends gives you new perspectives on the problem, and sometimes helps find answers. If you're worried about gaining weight because you have to give up a pricey gym membership, for example, try enlisting pals to do yoga together or take walks every morning. Or ask one to be a diet buddy to help you stay on a healthy eating track.

Work out your worry Exercise can ease worry by bathing your brain with feel-good chemicals, particularly serotonin and endorphins.

Nurturing your relationships is perhaps the best antidote to worry; it can remind you of what's truly important in life

Three 30-minute sessions a week of anything that raises your heart rate and your body temperature are ideal, but research shows that as little as 10 to 15 minutes of exercise can help soothe your spirits almost instantaneously (and, of course, it's good for you in other ways, too).

Busy your brain "You're only as happy as your saddest child," Amy Mayer of Charlotte, NC, observes. To battle day-to-day worries about her daughter and son, she makes a point of distracting herself: "I put the TV on while I'm cleaning. It catches my attention and breaks the worry loop." (Monitor your news viewing, though; watching too much bad news can exacerbate worry.) Leahy notes that "people often feel hijacked by worry, like they must follow where it leads, but that's not so. Frequently, I'll ask a fretting patient to describe the color and size of all the books in my

office. After five minutes, I'll point out that she hasn't worried in that time." Just find something that captures your attention—and your mind—and focus.

Spend time with a friend Nurturing your relationships is perhaps the best antidote to worry. "Have a Rolodex in your brain of people you regularly talk to. And keep in mind that meeting face-to-face is a hundred times more powerful than connecting electronically—phoning, e-mailing, or texting. Eye contact, body language—that all improves the bond," says Dr. Hallowell. Being with another person distracts you from your worries;

talking may point you toward a new solution; and a rich relationship reminds you of what's truly important in life, putting worry in its place.

"For preventive maintenance, make sure you have regularly scheduled social events—a book group, a weekly lunch date—so you don't have to reinvent the wheel every time," says Dr. Hallowell.

You can even have a worry buddy—a friend or family member who will lead you toward productive worry or help you let go of worries you can't fix. Even chronic worriers can help each other if they make a pact to use self-help techniques rather than simply whip up each other's agonizing into a big pity party. Just make sure you agree on the ground rules of how you'll handle any crises of confidence: Nothing's more worrying than an unexpected phone call in the middle of the night. ■



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