

Letting go

Can you worry less and live with more joy?

Worrying is no way to live.

But if worry is your constant companion, you already know that. You know—too well—that worry can sabotage sleep and make your heart race and hands sweat. Indeed, worry is such a toxic emotion that some people literally worry themselves into full-blown depressions.

When worry becomes overwhelming, many of us struggle to gain control. But “the very strategies we turn to usually make matters worse,” cautions Robert Leahy, Ph.D., a clinical professor in psychiatry at Weill Medical College of Cornell University and author of *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You* (Harmony Books, 2005).

Perhaps you try to suppress your worries—by telling yourself, Stop it! While this tactic may seem worthwhile, invariably it backfires, says Dr. Leahy. “By actively trying to suppress a thought, you only wind up focusing on it,” he explains.

Even seeking reassurance from a friend brings only a brief reprieve, Dr. Leahy says. After a few moments of calm, worriers typically start to doubt the reassuring messages they received.

A new way

Still, effective strategies do exist to help even the most anxious worriers calm down, insists Dr. Leahy, who has spent more than 25 years studying and treating chronic fretters.

What follows is a sampling of those strategies, which share a common purpose. Ultimately, says Dr. Leahy, each is meant “to help you adjust your thinking so that you believe tomorrow will deliver something ordinary or even wonderful—not frightening.”

Next time you feel worried, try one or more of these approaches:

Differentiate. Worries come in two varieties: productive and nonproductive. Productive ones are the kind you can do something about—either immediately or soon. On the other hand, nonproductive worries are out of your control or can't be readily addressed. And they often involve an increasingly scary string of what-ifs.

Look at it this way: Worrying about whether

you have enough gas for a car trip is productive. You can check your gas gauge and get fuel if necessary. But agonizing about whether you'll encounter unexpected traffic delays is nonproductive; you can't change the outcome.

Learning to recognize nonproductive worries can help you let them go, Dr. Leahy says.

Accept uncertainty. Letting go of worthless worries is only possible if you make peace with life's unknowns. In many ways, worry is the search for answers that don't exist, such as how the stock market will perform.

Don't equate the unknown with danger. That's a common misstep for worriers, who tend to assume the worst when predicting the future. But in reality, 85 percent of those things worriers fret about have happy endings, according to Leahy's research.

Befriend yourself. Imagine suggestions you would give to a worried friend. “Most of us are less pessimistic and more balanced when advising other people,” Dr. Leahy says.

Live with your emotions. Worriers are often afraid of unpleasant feelings that are part of normal life. Rather than try to worry away your emotions, recognize that your feelings—

which may only be temporary—are part of being a feeling, thinking human being.

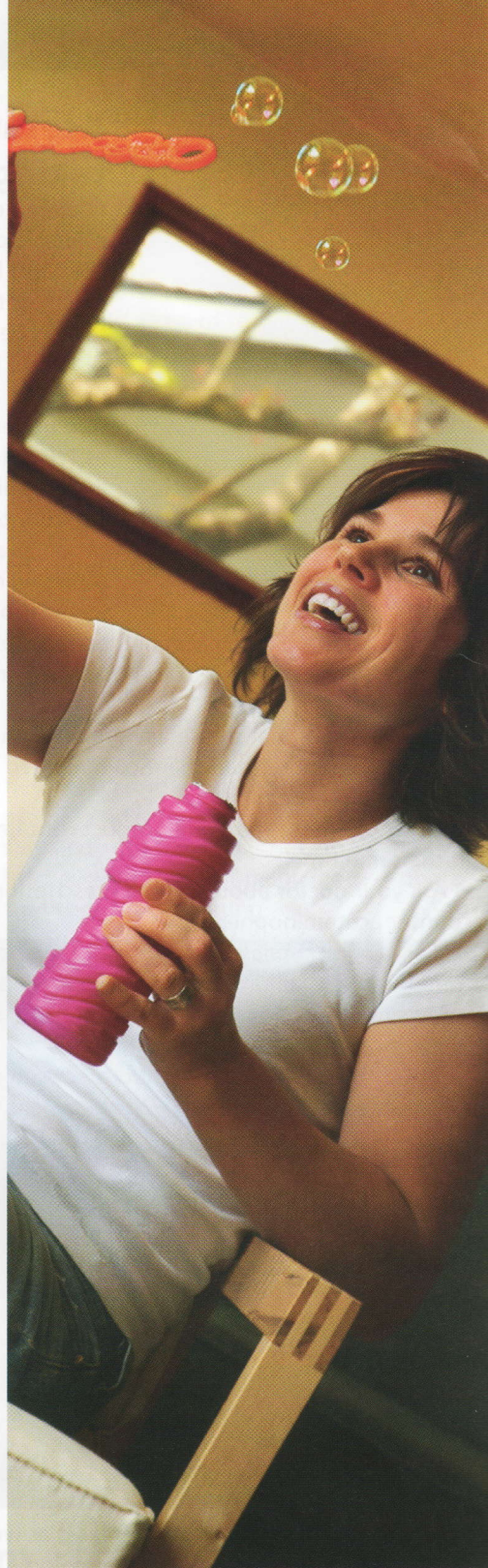
Living in the moment

Persistent worriers can be so preoccupied with the future that they don't enjoy the present. Dr. Leahy suggests working on your ability to live in the here and now—and help worries diminish. Try to:

■ **Gain perspective.** Ask yourself, How will I feel about this concern in a month? A year? Five years? In hindsight, many of our worries turn out to be fairly trivial.

■ **Stay in the moment.** Instead of fretting about tomorrow, ask yourself: What positive or constructive thing can I do right now?

■ **Improve the moment.** If what you're experiencing is truly upsetting, try to make the moment better. Soothe yourself with music, or take a walk outside and savor a little nature. <



Seeking help if needed

If you just can't seem to stop worrying, it may be time to ask for help.

If persistent anxiety is repeatedly sabotaging your sleep, interfering with your ability to concentrate, or disrupting your work or personal life, let your doctor know. That's especially important if you are also having frequent physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomach upsets or a racing heart. Counseling, medication, or a combination of both may help.