

How to Overcome Your Worries

BY ROBERT L. LEAHY

"... Since most worries never come true, worriers often are forced to admit, 'I can't recall what I was worried about.'"

EVERYONE SEEMS to worry, yet chronic worriers—those who worry all the time—wait almost 10 years to seek out psychotherapy; that is if they ever decide to go. Moreover, they have been hearing bad advice all the while: You have to think more positively, they are told. You should believe in yourself. Why are you punishing yourself? Do you want to suffer? Just stop worrying. This is like saying to someone who is anorexic, "Why don't you have a pastry?" The chance that this advice will work is about zero.

So, what are the rules for being a worrier?

- If something bad can happen, then it is your responsibility to worry about it.
- Do not accept any uncertainty—you need to know for sure.
- Treat all of your negative thoughts as if they are true.
- Anything bad that could happen is a reflection of who you are as a person.
- Failure is unacceptable.
- Get rid of any negative feelings immediately.
- Treat everything like an emergency.

Now that you know the rules, you can worry every single day of your life about something that probably will never happen. Congratulations, you are on the royal road to misery.

Worriers believe that they need to worry in order to be prepared for—or to avoid—the bad things that are going to happen to them. There is a lot of excellent research on the nature of worry as well as how to get control of it. What follows are seven steps to conquer those worries:

Distinguish productive from unproductive worry. Ask yourself, "What is the advantage that I hope to get in worrying?" Worriers believe that simply having a thought—"I might fail"—means that they should worry about it. They think that worry will prepare, motivate, and keep them from ever being surprised.

If I am going to fly from New York to Rome, productive worry involves action that I can take now. For instance, I can purchase my airline ticket and reserve a hotel room. Unproductive worry involves all the what-ifs that I cannot do anything about: What if my scheduled talk does not go well? What if I get lost in Rome?

Accept reality and commit to change. Research shows that worriers cannot tolerate uncertainty, treating it as if it was a sure negative. Ironically, 85% of the things that worriers worry about turn out to have a positive outcome, and even when the outcome is negative, 79% of the time worriers end up saying, "I handled that better than I thought I would." Demanding certainty is hopeless. Instead, look for the advantages of having some uncertainty. These include novelty, surprise, challenge, change, and growth. Otherwise, life is boring.

Along with accepting some reality and uncertainty, we know that worriers try to avoid uncomfortable experiences. So, as therapists, we ask worriers to list all the things that they are avoiding—and then begin doing these things. The goal is "constructive discomfort" and "successful imperfection." An individual has to be uncomfortable to grow, and change and success are purchased at the price of imperfection. These ideas can be quite empowering. Once someone realizes that he or she already is uncomfortable (since the individual in question is a worrier and probably a little depressed), that person at least can use discomfort to make progress.

Challenge your worried thinking. Worriers have thought-reality fusion. The thought process goes something like this, "If I think I might get rejected, it will turn out to be true unless I worry about it and do everything to be sure it does not happen." Worries are like obsessions in this sense; worriers treat their thoughts like they already are facts. Typical thinking errors include mind reading (he thinks I am a loser), jumping to conclusions (I don't know something, therefore I will fail), emotional reasoning (I feel nervous, so things will not work out), perfectionism (I need to be perfect to be confident), and discounting the positive (the fact that I have done well in the past is not a guarantee of anything). Worriers also have sudden-emergency ideas, such as slippery slope thinking (if this trend continues, things could go downhill in a real hurry) or trap door mentality (I could make a mistake and my whole life could fall apart).

In response, worriers should challenge and test out their thinking: What is the worst, best, and most likely outcome? What are all the things that I could do to deal with a real problem? Is there any evidence that things could turn out okay? Am I making the same incorrect predictions that I always do?

Look at the deeper threat. Personality plays a role in the problem of worrying. People differ from one another in what they worry about. Some are obsessed about money; others, health; and, still others, what society thinks of them. Cognitive therapy techniques help modify these concerns. Is there any real advantage in thinking in such perfectionistic and demanding terms? What would be the upside in cutting yourself a little slack? How about treating yourself like a human being?

Moreover, you can ask yourself what advice you would give a friend, or set up experiments where you do not ask for reassurance or act perfectly, or you spend time alone (if you think you always need someone). What will happen if you do not get reassurance? Will it really make any difference? You also can practice writing assertive statements to the parent or friend who taught you to believe all these negative things about yourself. These "messages" do not have to be sent, but it can be helpful to hear yourself defending your right not to live up to the demanding and critical views of others.

Turn failure into opportunity. Worriers feel that failure is unacceptable—and that everything can be viewed as a possible failure. If you go to a party and someone is not friendly, then you have failed. When I was in college, I had a friend who wrote a term paper for an economics course. It was a plan for an overnight mailing service. His professor gave him a low grade. "This is unrealistic. It will never work," the instructor

maintained. My friend graduated from college and became the founder of Federal Express.

Here are various strategies to deal with the fear of failure: I can focus on what I can control as well as behaviors that will succeed. It was not essential to succeed at that. There were some behaviors that did pay off. Everyone fails at something. Maybe no one noticed. Did I have the right goal? Failure is not fatal. Were my standards too high? Did I do better than before? Individuals do not have to look at experiences in their lives as failures, final, or fatal. View them as detours, challenges, and opportunities. Remember, too, that maybe the only person who really is focused on your "failure" is you.

Use your emotions rather than worry about them. Research shows that worry is a form of emotional avoidance. When people engage in worry, they are activating the thinking part of their brain and not allowing themselves to feel emotion. In fact, when people are engaged in worry, they temporarily are less emotionally aroused.

Worry is abstract. When they stop their string of what-ifs they experience intense emotion as tension, sweating, heart pounding, or insomnia. We have found that worriers have a hard time labeling their emotions, and they have very negative views about them. We help worriers accept and value their emotions, recognize that others have the same mixed feelings, and that painful emotions can point to a person's needs and higher values. Emotions are temporary—if you allow them to "be."

Put time on your side. Finally, worriers think that some bad event is approaching rapidly. They just know that failure, rejection, financial ruin, or life-threatening illness—or maybe all of these things—is right around the corner. Everything is an emergency: I need to know right now, is their mantra. They wake up in the middle of the night thinking about the potential disasters that next week may bring. Of course, it often is impossible to know "right now" what the future holds, so worriers worry that this is a bad sign.

We teach worriers how to turn off the urgency, step back from their fear of the future, and live and enjoy the present moment. Worriers should try to imagine getting into a time machine and then ask themselves: How will I feel one month after this happens—if it ever happens? Interestingly, since most worries never come true, worriers often are forced to admit, "I can't recall what I was worried about."

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