

IT KEEPS US UP AT NIGHT and distracts us all day, forever fluttering along the perimeter of our consciousness. “Should I have said that?” “Will tomorrow’s meeting go okay?” “Am I getting a sore throat?” Worry, that sinister half-sister to thought, does little to make our lives better. At best, it’s counterproductive; at worst, it inhibits our thoughts, drains our energy, and even makes us sick. It’s a bit like treading water: It takes constant effort to keep your head above the surface—and gets you nowhere fast.

We know what it feels like, what it sounds like in our heads. But what is worry, anyway? And why do we do it? “Think of it as a negative thought loop,” explains psychotherapist and yoga expert Stephen Cope, author of *The Wisdom of Yoga: A Seeker’s Guide to Extraordinary Living*. Since it never closes on a satisfying answer, worry only begets more worrying.

As for the driving factor, it’s fear—whether we acknowledge its true source or not. “It’s essentially a defensive mechanism,” adds Cope. By consuming ourselves with what’s on the surface (“Does my hair look bad?”) rather than what lies beneath (“Will they like me?”), we try to protect ourselves from facing what really bothers us.

The thing is, in the short term, it almost works. Researchers have found that the act of worrying does somewhat shield us from profound negative emotions. “When you’re engaged in the process of worrying, you activate the intellectual part of the brain while suppressing the amygdala, the part responsible for emotions,” explains Robert Leahy, Ph.D., cognitive psychologist and author of *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You*. So by worrying, you actually put a lid on your feelings. But given the long-term consequences, the payoff hardly seems worth it. “Intellectualizing your fear may prevent you from suffering right now,” Leahy continues, “but the emotion will surface in other ways—muscle tension, irritable bowel, back problems, and so on.” And the problems don’t stop there. Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health, in an ongoing study of older men, found that high levels of worry may even increase the risk of coronary heart disease.

Still, worry (and its relatives, fear, anxiety, and self-doubt) persists. In a study done by Jean Twenge, Ph.D., between the 1950s and the 1980s, children aged 9 to 12 rated statements such as “I worry about what’s going to happen.” The study found that normal samples of children from the ’80s outscored psychiatric populations from the 1950s—evidence that anxiety is on the rise.

Is there a solution to worrying besides “don’t worry”? Certainly, the usual platitudes abound: Lighten up; you can’t control the world; everything happens for a reason. They seldom help—so we set out to find out what does. We identified six types of worriers and asked experts including a Buddhist psychotherapist and a social science researcher to show us how each type can get a handle on their hand-wringing. Chances are you’ll see yourself in more than one of the following worry profiles—and that’s okay (we did, too). The goal isn’t to pull the plug on all of your worries, but to better understand where they come from and start seeing—and changing—the effects they have on the way you live.

stop worrying and start living!

Why do we worry so much? Our experts show how to break free from it for good

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the generalist

“I WORRY ALL THE TIME ABOUT EVERYTHING.” —ALEXIS M.

worry profile You worry as a way of life, about everything and nothing in particular. Your brain is always in worry mode; you’re not even sure what else your brain is for. You’re as likely to worry about whether the waiter will mess up your order as you are about getting to the bank before it closes. Sometimes you may even worry as a way of filling time.

diagnosis To change your worry habits (and reduce the wear and tear on your mind and body), you’ll need to learn to distinguish between productive and unproductive worry, says Leahy. “Ask yourself what you’re getting out of worrying,” he suggests. Does it help you get more prepared or more anxious? Does it hone your attention or scatter it? Worrying about the outline of a speech you’re about to give, for example, may motivate you to plan carefully—which Leahy calls productive worry. But if you’re consumed by “What if no one shows up?” that’s unproductive worry, and it provokes anxiety (especially since you can’t do anything about it).

coping strategy **Separate the wheat from the chaff.** Jot down every worry that’s buzzing through your mind right now. Don’t think; just write for two minutes straight. Then review your list. Which worries have a corresponding action? For those, write down the action (confirm the tickets, call the doctor, pay that bill). Your unproductive worries are those without a corresponding action. They represent nothing but a waste of time and energy—so cross them off.

Try this a few times throughout the week and analyze your findings. What percentage of your worries are unproductive? Fifty percent? Ten percent? When you become more aware of how much time you spend on unproductive worries, you’ll get better at refocusing that time elsewhere.



the control freak

“I THINK BY WORRYING ABOUT THINGS I’LL BE ABLE TO CONTROL THE OUTCOME.” —ALISON S.

worry profile Consciously or not, you believe you can control the universe through your thoughts. If you worry about it enough, you’ll make that good thing happen (or prevent a bad thing from happening). Consumed by uncertainty and fearful of change, you feel you could stop worrying if only you had the one thing that forever eludes you: total control.

diagnosis Wouldn’t life be easy if you knew what will happen tomorrow, six months, or five years from now? Since you don’t, you use worry to protect yourself from the unknown—with mixed results. “Life is profoundly impermanent and constantly changing,” says Cope, “and it’s best to let go of attempts to control experiences and outcomes.” Granted, worry can motivate us to prepare for the worst (pack an umbrella). But the notion that we can control the future with worry is inherently flawed—delusional thinking at best.

coping strategy **Get absorbed in the present.** “Give yourself something delightful and compelling to focus on right now,” says Cope. When you walk your dog, focus on the swing and rhythm of your legs. When you eat an orange, allow the whole of your attention to be absorbed by it—the scent, the texture, the weight of it in your hand. If your attention starts to wander, gently bring it back. The more in tune you are with this central, observing part of yourself, the easier it is to embrace the flow of life without feeling threatened—and the fewer opportunities you give worry to creep in.



the fortune teller

“I’M CONVINCED THAT A WORRY IS A DIVINE INSIGHT, AND THAT THE WORST IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN. I THINK I GIVE MY WORRIES TOO MUCH CREDIT.” —MARIA D.

worry profile You believe that your worry is a barometer or sign of future catastrophe. You live under the assumption that your worries predict what the future holds. If it’s on your radar as a cause for concern, it must, therefore, be a true threat.

diagnosis The problem, says Denise Marek, author of *CALM: A Proven Four-Step Process Designed*

Specifically for Women Who Worry, lies in an inability to tell the difference between worry and intuition. It’s easy to see how we might get the two confused, since they share trademark signs: a sense of impending doom, a change in physical sensation (nagging headache, nervous stomach). But there’s one key differentiating factor. “Intuition starts as a feeling,” says Marek. “Worry starts as a thought.”

To tell the difference, tune in to what comes first. For instance, you may get the heebies when you’re introduced to a new colleague. It could be your intuition telling you he can’t be trusted. But if you’re already worried about your job security, the unsettled feeling may really reflect worry, not intuition—in this case, that this guy poses a threat to your position. “If you worry that something bad may happen, the resulting nagging or negative sensation can cause you to misread that signal,” says Marek. Another key distinguishing factor: “Worry breeds anxiety—but intuition breeds calm,” says Marek. If your worrying worsens, reducing your ability to focus, chances are it’s stemming from anxiety. Intuition, on the other hand, often brings clarity, insight, and sound decision-making; you feel more sure, not less, of what you need to do.

coping strategy **Take the intuition test.** Pay close attention not just to the physical sensations you experience, but to how and when you began to feel them. If you experience a gut feeling, take a closer look at what may be the source of it. If it resulted from an interaction or a fleeting insight, ask yourself what might have caused it. If it came as a result of thoughts, chalk it up to worry-induced anxiety, and let it go.



the existentialist

“I WORRY THAT LIFE IS ESSENTIALLY MEANINGLESS, BUT THAT WE DO IT ANYWAY BECAUSE THE ALTERNATIVE IS EVEN MORE MEANINGLESS. (IS THAT POSSIBLE?)” —JESSICA B.

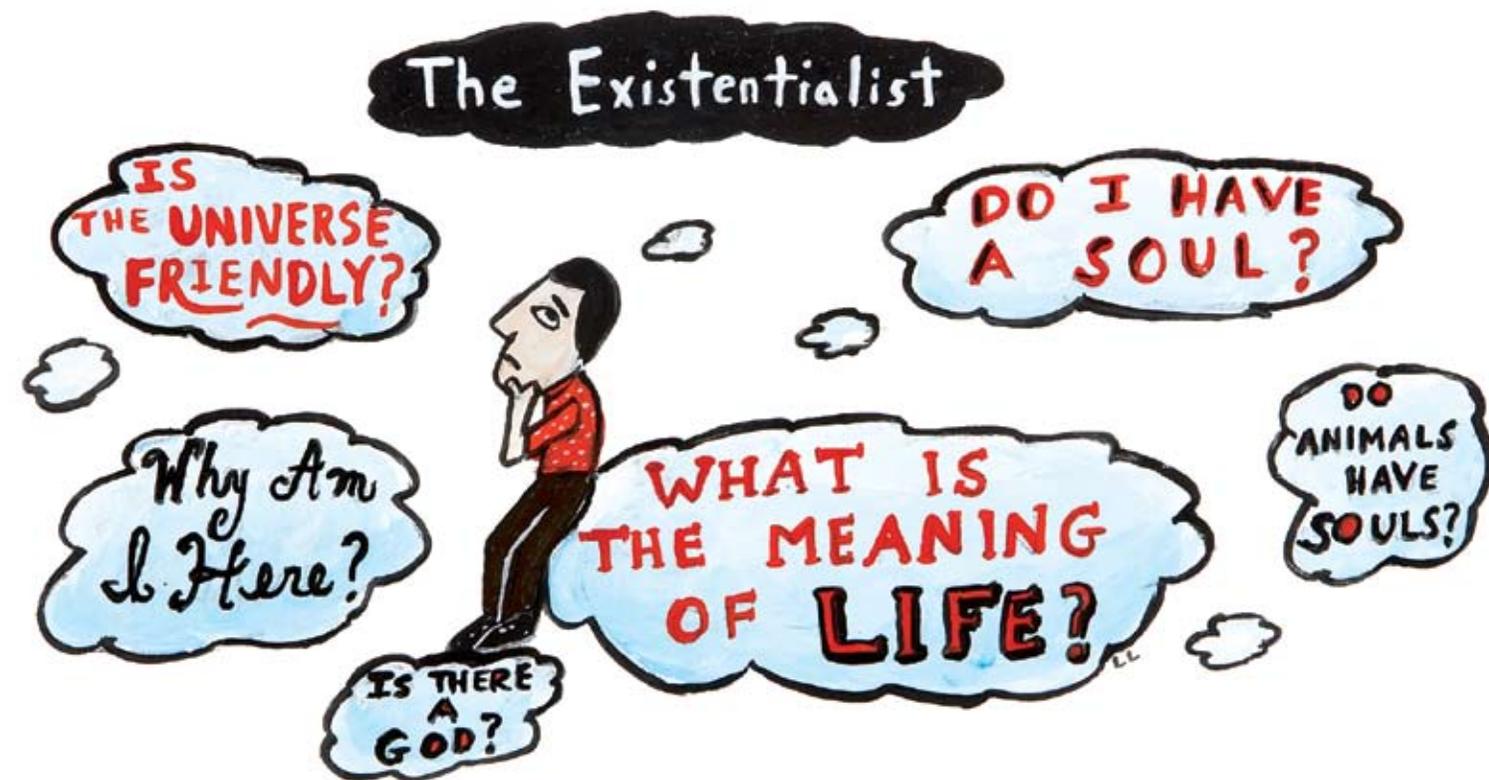
worry profile You’re haunted by larger, looming questions, such as “What is the point of life?” and “What does it all mean?” It feels trivial to go about your day without pondering the big-picture implications to everything.

diagnosis As an Existentialist, it may seem that you’re doing the big thinking for the rest of us, but you may just be adding larger portions to your worry plate. Not that a little intellectual discourse doesn’t make for compelling conversation, but when you prioritize metaphysical worry over more urgent matters (your job, your relationships, your finances), you may

be adding to your despair. “Interestingly, many contemplative traditions like Buddhism and yoga recommend *against* getting caught up in vast and fruitless philosophical deliberations,” says Cope. “Instead, they teach you to focus on the present and what’s in front of you right now.” He adds that the need to get caught up in big, airy topics can signify a kind of denial. “It’s much more beneficial to bring your awareness, energy, and attention closer to home,” says Cope.

coping strategy **Drill down.** Just as smaller worries tend to mask larger issues centering on self image

and social acceptance, bigger fears also often belie the issue at hand. First, identify what bigger-issue worries consume you and how often (every morning when you awake? after the news?). What are those worries distracting you from? Second, give yourself space to engage in your own intellectual curiosity—minus the accompanying fearful emotions—by channeling it more beneficially. Take an adult education class on Nietzsche at a local college, for instance, or start a book club where you can read and discuss the bigger issues together. That way you feed your zest for inquiry without letting it overwhelm you.



the rehasher

**“IT’S NOT VOLUNTARY;
I GET STUCK IN A
MENTAL LOOP.” —HANNAH T.**

worry profile You ruminate over past conversations and actions ad infinitum. You believe that if you re-visit the past enough times, you’ll somehow feel better about it. By worrying, you somehow hope to turn off the “Regret” switch. But it never seems to work, so you keep at it.

diagnosis What’s done is done—and she who tries to change or fix past events by worrying about them will find little relief. Part of the problem may lie in the way you talk to yourself: Negative self-talk can stir up regret, guilt, and self-doubt—all of which only feeds those ruminations. Do you editorialize your decisions? Do you condemn or chastise, thinking things like, “I always say stupid things like that,” or “I should never have gone to that party in the first place.” If so, you may want to turn the spotlight on your inner dialogue, which may be the source of worry.

copied strategy **Close the book.** Rather than go over and over past events or conversations, Marek suggests writing down what happened, how you acted, and what you’ll do differently next time. Note your use of “worry words”—*should, can’t, no one, everyone, always, never*—and commit to replacing those words with more realistic terms in the future: *could, prefer, can, choose not to, some people, sometimes*. The most valuable thing you gain from experience—good or bad—is the wisdom to handle things more wisely when that situation arises again. When you’re done, close the book on it, once and for all.



The
REHASHER

worldwide worrier

**“I WORRY ABOUT THE GENETIC
ENGINEERING OF CROPS AND ANIMALS. I WORRY
THAT THE BEES ARE DYING.” —MICHELLE S.**

worry profile You’re concerned about the fate of the planet at large, and burdened with thoughts of war, hunger, and greenhouse gas emissions. You feel it’s your duty to keep these issues on your worry radar, and that, by doing so, you are somehow helping improve the situation.

diagnosis Similar to the Existentialist, the Worldwide Worrier concerns herself with the big issues—minus the metaphysical slant. We should all be concerned with others’ safety and well-being and the health

of our environment. But when these concerns overshadow all else, you create no end of guilt (“How can I worry about replacing the washer/dryer when there’s a war going on, the planet’s heating up, and sea levels are rising?”). It’s time to pull back on the reins a bit. While your vision and compassion are admirable, they’re also getting in the way of your ability to do your best on any front.

copied strategy **Align actions with values.** Support the causes you hold dear—without committing

to a life fraught with unproductive worry. Rather than exert energy on worrying about the problem, transform those unproductive frets into actions that support the causes close to your heart. If you’re concerned with climate change (and who isn’t?), devise a plan for making a difference—whether it’s by changing your buying habits, writing to your mayor, or participating in local activist groups. Worrying alone is not enough to save the planet, prevent disease, or feed hungry children. Actions, even small ones, are the worry antidote.

