

APPROACH INFO

Coping with Worry

Worry is a type of anxiety whereby the individual thinks over and over about a variety of concerns, often devising many “What if...?” scenarios and planning how they would cope with each one. We all worry from time to time – it is a normal process and can help us prepare for the future. For some people, however, worry becomes difficult to control and may start getting in the way of them living life the way they would like to live it. People who worry excessively often also experience physical symptoms such as muscle tension, headaches or stomach aches. Excessive worry can lead to other difficulties such as irritability, “edginess”, fatigue, sleep difficulties and problems with concentration and making decisions. While anxiety is an essential human response to a perceived threat in our environment (i.e., fight/flight/freeze response common to all animals), in humans the anxiety response can be triggered by a *thought about a future threat*. This is worry.

Like other forms of anxiety, worry affects our thinking, our feelings and our behaviours. Chronic worriers often think *catastrophically*. This means that they tend to assume the worst possible outcome will definitely occur, and that they then will be unable to cope. They may feel anxious and experience associated physical sensations such as those listed above, as well as typical anxiety symptoms such as racing heart, shortness of breath, shaking and sweating. In terms of behaviours, it is common for people who worry a lot to avoid things they are worried about, procrastinate over tasks, and seek reassurance from others (e.g., parents, friends, spouses, medical professionals).

Techniques to Help Reduce Worry

The first step in reducing worry is to recognise that it is a cycle which, while often exhausting, can be very alluring. Often people who worry excessively have

been doing so for many years, so it has just become what their minds do automatically. In addition, worry feels like a very similar experience to problem-solving or planning, so it can be easy to justify to oneself.

1. **Determine whether you’re worrying or problem-solving.** Ask yourself: “Is there a problem to solve here or am I just going over possible scenarios?” If the answer is yes, there’s a problem (be honest!), go ahead and solve the problem (see our *Approach Info* sheet on Problem Solving).
2. **Determine whether your thinking is helpful or unhelpful.** Don’t get caught in an argument with your mind over whether the imagined outcomes are *possible*. Once you have determined worry is at play, simply ask “Is the way I’m thinking about this helpful?” If the answer is no, choose to implement one of the following strategies.
3. **Postpone worry.** One way to reduce the amount of time you spend worrying is to postpone your worry. This involves setting aside a given amount of time each day (½ hour is a good gauge) during which you can worry to your heart’s content. Outside of this scheduled time, when worries occur to you, note them down to worry about in you next scheduled worry time (this may be the following day). It can be particularly useful to keep a notebook beside your bed for this purpose.
4. **Let the worry go.** Develop a visual image that helps you imagine letting your worries go, such as picturing writing them on a helium balloon then letting them float away, picturing them on clouds moving across the sky or leaves floating past on a stream. Then get on with something important or enjoyable; give that activity your full attention.
5. **Practice being Mindful.** Mindfulness involves paying full attention to the present moment. As worry is such a future-focussed process, it makes sense that enhancing mindfulness skills will result in reduced worry (see our *Approach Info* sheet on mindfulness for further information).