

How to Stop Worrying

Strategies for Anxiety Relief

Worrying can be helpful when it spurs you to take action and solve a problem. But if you're preoccupied with "what ifs" and worst-case scenarios, worry becomes a problem. Unrelenting doubts and fears can be paralyzing. They can sap your emotional energy, send your anxiety levels soaring, and interfere with your daily life. But chronic worrying is a mental habit that can be broken. You can train your brain to stay calm and look at life from a more positive

Why is it so hard to stop worrying?

Constant worrying takes a heavy toll. It keeps you up at night and makes you tense and edgy during the day. You hate feeling like a nervous wreck. So why is it so difficult to stop worrying?

For most chronic worriers, the anxious thoughts are fueled by the beliefs—both negative and positive—they hold about worrying.

On the negative side, you may believe that your constant worrying is harmful, that it's going to drive you crazy or affect your physical health. Or you may worry that you're going to lose all control over your worrying—that it will take over and never stop.

On the positive side, you may believe that your worrying helps you avoid bad things, prevents problems, prepares you for the worst, or leads to solutions.

Negative beliefs, or worrying about worrying, add to your anxiety and keep worry going. But positive beliefs about worrying can be just as damaging. It's tough to break the worry habit if you believe that your worrying protects you. In order to stop worry and anxiety for good, you must give up your belief that worrying serves a positive purpose. Once you realize that worrying is the problem, not the solution, you can regain control of your worried mind.

Why you keep worrying

You have mixed feelings about your worries. On one hand, your worries are bothering you—you can't sleep, and you can't get these pessimistic thoughts out of your head. But there is a way that these worries make sense to you. For example, you think:

- Maybe I'll find a solution.
- I don't want to overlook anything.
- If I keep thinking a little longer, maybe I'll figure it out.

- I don't want to be surprised.
- I want to be responsible.

You have a hard time giving up on your worries because, in a sense, your worries have been working for you.

Source: *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You* by Robert L. Leahy, Ph.D.

Worry and anxiety self-help tip #1: Create a worry period

It's tough to be productive in your daily life when anxiety and worry are dominating your thoughts. But what can you do? If you're like many chronic worriers, your anxious thoughts feel uncontrollable. You've tried lots of things, from distracting yourself, reasoning with your worries, and trying to think positive, but nothing seems to work.

Why trying to stop anxious thoughts doesn't work

Telling yourself to stop worrying doesn't work—at least not for long. You can distract yourself or suppress anxious thoughts for a moment, but you can't banish them for good. In fact, trying to do so often makes them stronger and more persistent.

You can test this out for yourself. Close your eyes and picture a pink elephant. Once you can see the pink elephant in your mind, stop thinking about it. Whatever you do, for the next five minutes, don't think about pink elephants!

How did you do? Did thoughts of pink elephants keep popping in your brain?

“Thought stopping” backfires because it forces you to pay extra attention to the very thought you want to avoid. You always have to be watching for it, and this very emphasis makes it seem even more important.

But that doesn't mean there's nothing you can do to control your worry. You just need to try a different approach. This is where the strategy of postponing worrying comes in. Rather than trying to stop or get rid of an anxious thought, give yourself permission to have it, but put off thinking any more about it until later.

Learning to postpone worrying:

1. **Create a “worry period.”** Choose a set time and place for worrying. It should be the same every day (e.g. in the living room from 5:00 to 5:20 p.m.) and early enough that it won't make you anxious right before bedtime. During your worry period, you're allowed to worry about whatever's on your mind. The rest of the day, however, is a worry-free zone.
2. **Postpone your worry.** If an anxious thought or worry comes into your head during the day, make a brief note of it on paper and postpone it to your worry period. Remind

yourself that you'll have time to think about it later, so there's no need to worry about it right now. Save it for later and continue to go about your day.

3. **Go over your “worry list” during the worry period.** Reflect on the worries you wrote down during the day. If the thoughts are still bothering you, allow yourself to worry about them, but only for the amount of time you've specified for your worry period. If the worries don't seem important any more, cut your worry period short and enjoy the rest of your day.

Postponing worrying is effective because it breaks the habit of dwelling on worries in the present moment. Yet there's no struggle to suppress the thought or judge it. You simply save it for later. As you develop the ability to postpone your anxious thoughts, you'll start to realize that you have more control over your worrying than you think.

Worry and anxiety self-help tip #2: Ask yourself if the problem is solvable

Research shows that while you're worrying, you temporarily feel less anxious. Running over the problem in your head distracts you from your emotions and makes you feel like you're getting something accomplished. But worrying and problem solving are two very different things.

Problem solving involves evaluating a situation, coming up with concrete steps for dealing with it, and then putting the plan into action. Worrying, on the other hand, rarely leads to solutions. No matter how much time you spend dwelling on worst-case scenarios, you're no more prepared to deal with them should they actually happen.

Distinguish between solvable and unsolvable worries

If a worry pops into your head, start by asking yourself whether the problem is something you can actually solve. The following questions can help:

- Is the problem something you're currently facing, rather than an imaginary what-if?
- If the problem is an imaginary what-if, how likely is it to happen? Is your concern realistic?
- Can you do something about the problem or prepare for it, or is it out of your control?

Productive, solvable worries are those you can take action on right away. For example, if you're worried about your bills, you could call your creditors to see about flexible payment options.

Unproductive, unsolvable worries are those for which there is no corresponding action. “What if I get cancer someday?” or “What if my kid gets into an accident?”

If the worry is solvable, start brainstorming. Make a list of all the possible solutions you can think of. Try not to get too hung up on finding the perfect solution. Focus on the things you have the power to change, rather than the circumstances or realities beyond your control. After you've evaluated your options, make a plan of action. Once you have a plan and start doing something about the problem, you'll feel much less worried.

Dealing with unsolvable worries

But what if the worry isn't something you can solve? If you're a chronic worrier, the vast majority of your anxious thoughts probably fall in this camp. In such cases, it's important to tune into your emotions.

As previously mentioned, worrying helps you avoid unpleasant emotions. Worrying keeps you in your head, thinking about how to solve problems rather than allowing yourself to feel the underlying emotions. But you can't worry your emotions away. While you're worrying, your feelings are temporarily suppressed, but as soon as you stop, the tension and anxiety bounces back. And then, you start worrying about your feelings, "What's wrong with me? I shouldn't feel this way!"

Learn how emotional savvy reduces worry

The only way out of this vicious cycle is by learning to embrace your feelings. This may seem scary at first because of negative beliefs you have about emotions. For example, you may believe that you should always be rational and in control, that your feelings should always make sense, or that you shouldn't feel certain emotions, such as fear or anger.

The truth is that emotions—like life—are messy. They don't always make sense and they're not always pleasant. But as long as you can accept your feelings as part of being human, you'll be able to experience them without becoming overwhelmed and learn how to use them to your advantage. The following tips will help you find a better balance between your intellect and your emotions.

Worry and anxiety self-help tip #3: Accept uncertainty

The inability to tolerate uncertainty plays a huge role in anxiety and worry. Chronic worriers can't stand doubt or unpredictability. They need to know with 100 percent certainty what's going to happen. Worrying is seen as a way to predict what the future has in store—a way to prevent unpleasant surprises and control the outcome. The problem is, it doesn't work.

Thinking about all the things that could go wrong doesn't make life any more predictable. You may feel safer when you're worrying, but it's just an illusion. Focusing on worst-case scenarios won't keep bad things from happening. It will only keep you from enjoying the good things you have in the present. So if you want to stop worrying, start by tackling your need for certainty and immediate answers.

Challenging intolerance of uncertainty: The key to anxiety relief

Ask yourself the following questions and write down your responses. See if you can come to an understanding of the disadvantages and problems of being intolerant of uncertainty.

- Is it possible to be certain about everything in life?

- What are the advantages of requiring certainty, versus the disadvantages? Or, how is needing certainty in life helpful and unhelpful?
- Do you tend to predict bad things will happen just because they are uncertain? Is this a reasonable thing to do? What is the likelihood of positive or neutral outcomes?
- Is it possible to live with the small chance that something negative may happen, given its likelihood is very low?

Adapted from: *Accepting Uncertainty, Centre for Clinical Interventions*

Worry and anxiety self-help tip #4: Challenge anxious thoughts

If you suffer from chronic anxiety and worries, chances are you look at the world in ways that make it seem more dangerous than it really is. For example, you may overestimate the possibility that things will turn out badly, jump immediately to worst-case scenarios, or treat every negative thought as if it were fact. You may also discredit your own ability to handle life's problems, assuming you'll fall apart at the first sign of trouble. These irrational, pessimistic attitudes are known as cognitive distortions.

Although cognitive distortions aren't based on reality, they're not easy to give up. Often, they're part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that's become so automatic you're not even completely aware of it. In order to break these bad thinking habits and stop the worry and anxiety they bring, you must retrain your brain.

Start by identifying the frightening thought, being as detailed as possible about what scares or worries you. Then, instead of viewing your thoughts as facts, treat them as hypotheses you're testing out. As you examine and challenge your worries and fears, you'll develop a more balanced perspective.

Stop worry by questioning the worried thought:

- What's the evidence that the thought is true? That it's not true?
- Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?
- What's the probability that what I'm scared of will actually happen?
- If the probability is low, what are some more likely outcomes?
- Is the thought helpful? How will worrying about it help me and how will it hurt me?
- What would I say to a friend who had this worry?

Cognitive Distortions that Add to Anxiety, Worry, and Stress

All-or-nothing thinking - Looking at things in black-or-white categories, with no middle ground. "If I fall short of perfection, I'm a total failure."

Overgeneralization - Generalizing from a single negative experience, expecting it to hold true forever. "I didn't get hired for the job. I'll never get any job."

The mental filter - Focusing on the negatives while filtering out all the positives. Noticing the one thing that went wrong, rather than all the things that went right.

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Diminishing the positive - Coming up with reasons why positive events don't count. "I did well on the presentation, but that was just dumb luck."

Jumping to conclusions - Making negative interpretations without actual evidence. You act like a mind reader, "I can tell she secretly hates me." Or a fortune teller, "I just *know* something terrible is going to happen."

Catastrophizing - Expecting the worst-case scenario to happen. "The pilot said we're in for some turbulence. The plane's going to crash!"

Emotional reasoning - Believing that the way you feel reflects reality. "I feel frightened right now. That must mean I'm in real physical danger."

'Shoulds' and 'should-nots' - Holding yourself to a strict list of what you should and shouldn't do and beating yourself up if you break any of the rules

Labeling - Labeling yourself based on mistakes and perceived shortcomings. "I'm a failure; an idiot; a loser."

Personalization - Assuming responsibility for things that are outside your control. "It's my fault my son got in an accident. I should have warned him to drive carefully in the rain."

Worry and anxiety self-help tip # 5: Be aware of how others affect you

How you feel is affected by the company you keep, whether you're aware of it or not. Studies show that emotions are contagious. We quickly "catch" moods from other people—even from strangers who never speak a word (e.g. the terrified woman sitting by you on the plane; the fuming man in the checkout line). The people you spend a lot of time with have an even greater impact on your mental state.

- **Keep a worry diary.** You may not be aware of how people or situations are affecting you. Maybe this is the way it's always been in your family, or you've been dealing with the stress so long that it feels normal. You may want to keep a worry diary for a week or so. Every time you start to worry, jot down the thought and what triggered it. Over time, you'll start to see patterns.
- **Spend less time with people who make you anxious.** Is there someone in your life who drags you down or always seems to leave you feeling stressed? Think about cutting back on the time you spend with that person or establish healthier relationship boundaries. For example, you might set certain topics off-limits, if you know that talking about them with that person makes you anxious.
- **Choose your confidantes carefully.** Know who to talk to about situations that make you anxious. Some people will help you gain perspective, while others will feed into your worries, doubts, and fears.

Worry and anxiety self-help tip #6: Practice mindfulness

Worrying is usually focused on the future—on what might happen and what you'll do about it. The centuries-old practice of mindfulness can help you break free of your worries by bringing your attention back to the present. In contrast to the previous techniques of challenging your

anxious thoughts or postponing them to a worry period, this strategy is based on observing and then letting them go. Together, they can help you identify where your thinking is causing problems, while helping you get in touch with your emotions.

- **Acknowledge and observe your anxious thoughts and feelings.** Don't try to ignore, fight, or control them like you usually would. Instead, simply observe them as if from an outsider's perspective, without reacting or judging.
- **Let your worries go.** Notice that when you don't try to control the anxious thoughts that pop up, they soon pass, like clouds moving across the sky. It's only when you engage your worries that you get stuck.
- **Stay focused on the present.** Pay attention to the way your body feels, the rhythm of your breathing, your ever-changing emotions, and the thoughts that drift across your mind. If you find yourself getting stuck on a particular thought, bring your attention back to the present moment.

Using mindfulness meditation to stay focused on the present is a simple concept, but it takes practice to reap the benefits. At first, you'll probably find that your mind keeps wandering back to your worries. Try not to get frustrated. Each time you draw your focus back to the present, you're reinforcing a new mental habit that will help you break free of the negative worry cycle.