

## Combat your worry

Worry promotes anxiety and depression. You find yourself thinking the same catastrophic thoughts over and over again, becoming steadily more anxious, and you never come up with a solution to the problem.

Perhaps you worry about your health. *“What if this mole is really skin cancer?”* Perhaps you worry about harm coming to yourself or others. *“John’s late. What if he got in a car accident on the freeway?”* Perhaps you worry about the consequences of your actions. *“What if I forget my lines in the play?”*

Sometimes it is important to think about the issues facing us. Unless we examine our finances we cannot sort them out. If we ignore our health we can miss real symptoms that should prompt a visit to the doctor. Without careful thought we might never figure out our job options. It is important to *problem-solve*. If this is what you are doing, keep at it.

Worry is different. In true worry we simply grind away at the problem, never coming to a solution and secretly knowing that we won’t. We think *“what if, what if, what if?”* and never get to the problem-solving. This kind of worry we can do without.

There are several approaches that can help us cope with worry. Each is valuable, and each is applicable to certain situations. We’ll cover four of them.

### Strategy 1: Facing the worst

We often worry about trivial matters. *“Look at this traffic! I’m going to be late for my dental appointment.” “If I don’t get this gift bought today it’ll arrive late for Christmas!”* We work ourselves into a full-blown stress reaction.

Keep in mind that your stress response developed in a primitive world for one purpose: To save your life. When you find yourself becoming extremely stressed, ask yourself two simple questions – *and answer them*.

- *What is the worst thing that could happen?*
- *Could I survive that?*

So there you are: caught in traffic, late for your appointment, and with a powerful stress response happening. Your body is all set to rescue you from the saber-toothed tiger, but there isn’t one nearby. What is the worst thing that could happen? *“I’ll be late for my appointment and I’ll have to reschedule.”* Could you survive that? *“It would be inconvenient to have to set another appointment, and it would be embarrassing to admit to the receptionist that I forgot about rush hour. But yes, I would survive it. My life isn’t in danger.”*

When you look at the worst possible outcome, you often realize that while it might be unpleasant, it is completely survivable. This allows you to let go of some of the tension you have been holding. *"I guess I can slow down and stop driving like I'm on a racetrack."*

## **Strategy 2: Worrying to the end**

When we worry, we often play out a frightening little "what if" movie for ourselves. We play the movie up until a particularly unpleasant moment, and then we rewind and start again. We never get past that particular moment, and never see beyond the worst moment to the resolution of the situation.

Tracy was afraid of having a panic attack and fainting in the shopping mall where she worked. She imagined herself parking her car in the lot, walking to the entrance and feeling a little bit dizzy, walking along the access corridor and feeling dizzy still, walking out into the main, crowded area, becoming overcome with dizziness and panic, and fainting. And then she would imagine the entire scene over again. She kept worrying up until the point when she would faint, and then she would start over.

To combat her worry she opted to worry it all the way through. So there she is, passed out on the floor of the mall. What happens? *"A crowd gathers. Someone calls an ambulance."* And then? *"The ambulance comes. I'm awake by this time and they examine me with everyone looking."* And then? *"They pack me into the ambulance and take me to the hospital."* And then? *"They look me over and realize it's a panic attack and give me a sedative."* And then? *"They send me home."* And then? *"Well...nothing really. It's over. I'm home."*

Tracy was able to worry beyond the moment of fainting to the resolution of the event. No longer did it seem to be a blank wall she was headed toward. She knew that if the worst happened, it would eventually resolve and she would be safely back at home. This allowed her to relax a bit and allow for the possibility of having a panic attack at the mall. Because she was no longer so worried about it, she didn't hyperventilate on the way to work, didn't become dizzy, and had fewer panic attacks.

If you want to try this technique, write down the topic of the worry (e.g., *"fainting at the mall"*) and the sequence of thoughts that you have when you worry about it. Describe it as though you are actually seeing it happen. See if there is a moment when you stop the movie and start again. If you find such a moment, keep the movie going. Ask yourself *"And then what happens?"* and write down your best guess. Then what? Then what? Write down all of the steps until you reach a resolution of some kind.

### Strategy 3: Worry inflation

In Judo, you try to use your opponent's strength against him. If he lunges forward to hit you, you might grab his hand and pull it even further, causing him to lose his balance. In worry inflation you do the same thing. Rather than trying to minimize your fears, you make them as big as possible.

Why would you do this? Because if you exaggerate some fears they eventually become ridiculous. You can let go of the worry more easily. It's a little like blowing a balloon up more and more until it pops.

Joanne came to therapy to overcome her intense fear of public speaking. She especially wanted to be able to conduct the bible reading at her church, a role taken on by various members of the congregation in turn. She had never done it and feared being unable to speak if she tried. She chose to use worry inflation on her fear.

Working with her therapist, she came up with a script for her worry:

*I arrive at the church and it's my day to do the bible reading. The place is packed. I'm terrified. When it's time to do the reading I get up to walk to the lectern and my legs are shaking so badly I can barely move. I finally get there, and the big church bible is open at the lectern. I'm shaking so badly I hang on to the bible and the lectern beneath it, which rattles loudly against the wood floor. My mouth is so dry that nothing comes out, just a choking sound. I'm holding the bible so tightly that the pages begin to rip out of the binding and fall to the floor. The congregation is shocked. They begin to boo, and yell at me to sit down. I can't move.*

*Eventually they start throwing their hymnals at me. Some of the books land on the steps, some of them skid along behind me, some of them hit me. Then they start throwing the communion glasses, which explode like little glass bombs as they crash all around me. Some of the hymnals hit the stained glass windows, which collapse inward in showers of broken glass. Eventually I can't take it any more. I dart out from behind the lectern, race down the center aisle and out of the church. The entire congregation pours into the aisle behind me. They chase me through the streets, yelling and waving their fists. News helicopters fly along overhead. Eventually God appears, and He's mad at me too....*

Joanne found that her script had the same effect on her as it might have had on you. At first she got more anxious. Then, as the situation got worse and worse, it eventually struck her as funny. The anxiety vanished. She knew the congregation wasn't going to attack her, that no one would throw anything, that she wouldn't be chased through the streets. She didn't have to convince herself of these things or challenge her beliefs. She reread the script a number of times. Whenever she found herself worrying about doing the bible reading she would push it to the extreme, news helicopters and all. The anxiety would fade. Eventually she did the reading, and it went well.

Worry inflation doesn't work with everything. If you magnify some worries (a fear of a violent partner, or a concern about being diagnosed with a fatal illness, for example) they may never reach a point where they become ridiculous. But many of our everyday worries can be inflated to the point of silliness, and this can help us let go of them.

*"When I turn up late, the dentist is so furious that he screams uncontrollably and chases me out of his office. I'm blacklisted for every dentist in the city, my teeth fall out, and newspapers publish photos of my mouth as a caution to people to be on time for their appointments...."*

Is there a worry of yours that you could use this technique on? If so, what is it?

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On spare paper, write out a script that takes you to the moment you fear most. *"I'm at the lectern but can't speak."* Then make it worse. And worse. Push toward more and more outrageous outcomes.

When your script is done, read it over and over until you have the scenario memorized and your anxiety at reading it has faded.

When you find yourself worrying about your fear, go through your imaginary situation to "pull" it to an extreme. Keep making it worse until the anxiety fades.

#### **Strategy 4: Worrying Time**

Worrying time is designed to help you stop worrying about problems for most of the day by saving your worrying for a particular time. This can be easier than stopping the worry altogether, and you may *have* to think about some of your worries in order to decide what to do about them. Here's the strategy:

- Pick a time during the day or week (for example, Mondays and Thursdays between 6 and 6:30 pm) when you will sit down and think about the things that have been worrying you. Pick times when you will not be distracted.
- Carry a pen and paper (index cards work well) with you at all times. When you catch yourself worrying, make a note of the topic. Assure yourself that you will think about the issue, but not right now. Shift your mind onto something else.
- When it is time to worry, take out your list of topics and consider each of them in turn. You may find that you can actually come up with a solution or a decision about how to handle some of your worries. Others you may just worry about.

This strategy may sound a bit odd, but it can be surprisingly helpful if you are disciplined at carrying it out. Setting a time for worry helps you feel in charge and often makes worry more productive.