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How to Stop Worrying

Self-Help Tips for Anxiety Relief

Everyone worries. Worrying can even 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 anxious thoughts 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 balanced, less fearful perspective.

How much worrying is too much?

Worries, doubts, and anxieties are a normal part of life. It's natural to worry about an unpaid bill, an upcoming job interview, or a first date. But "normal" worry becomes excessive when it's persistent and uncontrollable. You worry every day about many different things, you can't get anxious thoughts out of your head, and it interferes with your

Constant worrying, negative thinking, and always expecting the worst can take a toll on your emotional and physical health. It can leave you feeling restless and jumpy, cause insomnia, headaches, stomach problems, and muscle tension, and make it difficult to concentrate at work or school. You may take your negative feelings out on the people closest to you, self-medicate with alcohol or drugs, or try to distract yourself by zoning out in front of screens. Chronic worrying can also be a major symptom of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), a common anxiety disorder that involves tension, nervousness, and a general feeling of unease that colors your whole life.

Why do I worry excessively?

If you suffer from chronic anxiety and worries, chances are you look at the world in ways that make it seem more threatening 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 anxious 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.

Examples of cognitive distortions that add to anxiety, worry, and stress, include:

All-or-nothing thinking, looking at things in black-or-white categories, with no middle ground. "If everything is not perfect, I'm a total failure."

Overgeneralization 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."

Focusing on the negatives while filtering out the positives. Noticing the one thing that went wrong, rather than all the things that went right. "I got the last question on the test wrong. I'm an idiot."

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

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."

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

Believing that the way you feel reflects reality. "I feel like such a fool. Everyone must be laughing at me."

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. "I should never have tried starting a conversation with her. I'm such a moron."

Labeling yourself based on mistakes and perceived shortcomings. "I'm a failure; I'm boring; I deserve to be alone."

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."

Why is it so hard to stop worrying?

While cognitive distortions aren't based on reality, they're difficult to give up because they're often part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that's become so automatic you're not even completely aware of it. You may think that worrying will eventually help you to find a solution to a problem or prevent you from being surprised by anything that happens in the future. You may think that worrying protects you in some way or even equate it with being responsible or caring. In order to stop worry and anxiety for good, though, you need to give up the belief that your worrying serves a positive purpose. Once you realize that worrying is the problem, not the solution, you can turn off anxious thoughts and regain control of your worried mind.

You can't just tell yourself to stop worrying

Telling yourself to stop worrying doesn't work—at least not for long. You can distract yourself for a moment, but you can't banish anxious thoughts 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 it in your mind, stop thinking about it. Whatever you do, for the next 60 seconds, 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. Instead of trying to simply distract yourself, there are steps you can take to retrain your brain and change how you look at the world.

How to stop worrying tip 1: Hit the pause button on anxious thoughts

If you worry excessively, it can seem like negative thoughts are running through your head on endless repeat. You may feel like you're spiraling out of control, going crazy, or about to burn out under the weight of all this anxiety. But there are steps you can take right now to hit the pause button on anxious thoughts and give yourself a time out from relentless worrying.

Get up and get moving. Exercise is a natural and effective anti-anxiety treatment because it releases endorphins which relieve tension and stress, boost energy, and enhance your sense of well-being. Even more importantly, by really focusing on how your body feels as you move, you can interrupt the constant flow of worries running through your head. Pay attention to the sensation of your feet hitting the ground as you walk, run, or dance, for example, or the rhythm of your breathing, or the feeling of the sun or wind on your skin.

Take a yoga or tai chi class. By focusing your mind on your movements and breathing, practicing yoga or tai chi keeps your attention on the present, helping to clear your mind and lead to a relaxed state.

Meditate. Meditation works by switching your focus from worrying about the future or dwelling on the past to what's happening right now. By being fully engaged in the present moment, you can interrupt the endless loop of negative thoughts and worries. And you don't need to sit cross-legged, light candles or incense, or chant. Simply find a quiet, comfortable place and choose one of the many free or inexpensive smartphone apps that can guide you through the meditation process.

Practice progressive muscle relaxation. This can help you break the endless loop of worrying by focusing your mind on your body instead of your thoughts. By alternately tensing and then releasing different muscle groups in your body, you release muscle tension in your body. And as your body relaxes, your mind will follow.

Try deep breathing. When you worry, you become anxious and breathe faster, often leading to further anxiety. But by practicing deep breathing exercises, you can calm your mind and quieten negative thoughts.

Relaxation techniques can change the brain

While the above relaxation techniques can provide some immediate respite from worry and anxiety, practicing them regularly can also change your brain. Research has shown that regular meditation, for example, can boost activity on the left side of the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for feelings of serenity and joy. The more you practice, the greater the anxiety relief you'll experience and the more control you'll start to feel over your anxious thoughts and worries.

Tip 2: Talk about your worries

It may seem like a simplistic solution, but talking face to face with trusted friend or family member—someone who will listen to you without judging, criticizing, or continually being distracted—is one of the most effective ways to calm your nervous system and diffuse anxiety. When your worries start spiraling, talking them over can make them seem far less threatening.

Keeping worries to yourself only causes them to build up until they seem overwhelming. But saying them out loud can often help you to make sense of what you're feeling and put things in perspective. If your fears are unwarranted, verbalizing them can expose them for what they are—needless worries. And if your fears are justified, sharing them with someone else can produce solutions that you may not have thought of alone.

Tip 3: Practice mindfulness

Worrying is usually focused on the future—on what might happen and what you'll do about it—or on the past—rehashing the things you've said or done. The centuries-old practice of mindfulness can help you break free of your worries by bringing your attention back to the present. This strategy is based on observing your worries and then letting them go, helping you identify where your thinking is causing problems and getting in touch with your emotions.

Acknowledge and observe your worries. 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 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.

Tip 4: Learn to postpone worrying

It's tough to be productive in your daily activities when anxiety and worry are dominating your thoughts and distracting you from work, school, or your home life. This is where the strategy of postponing worrying can help. Rather than trying to stop or get rid of an anxious thought, give

yourself permission to have it, but put off dwelling on it until later.

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. **Write down your worries.** If an anxious thought or worry comes into your head during the day, make a brief note of it and then continue about your day. Remind yourself that you’ll have time to think about it later, so there’s no need to worry about it right now. Also, writing down your thoughts-on a pad or on your phone or computer-is much harder work than simply thinking them, so your worries are more likely to lose their power.
3. **Go over your “worry list” during the worry period.** If the thoughts you wrote down are still bothering you, allow yourself to worry about them, but only for the amount of time you’ve specified for your worry period. As you examine your worries in this way, you’ll often find it easier to develop a more balanced perspective. And if your worries don’t seem important any more, simply cut your worry period short and enjoy the rest of your day.

Use your worry period to challenge anxious thoughts

Postponing worrying is effective because it breaks the habit of dwelling on worries when you’ve got other things to do, yet there’s no struggle to suppress the thought or judge it. You simply save it for later. And as you develop the ability to postpone your anxious thoughts, you’ll start to realize that you have more control than you think. You can then use your assigned worry period to challenge your negative thoughts:

- 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?

Tip 5: Distinguish between solvable and unsolvable worries

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.

Is your worry solvable?

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 anxious.

If the worry is not solvable, accept the uncertainty. If you're a chronic worrier, the vast majority of your anxious thoughts probably fall in this camp. Worrying is often a way we try 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. Focusing on worst-case scenarios will only keep you from enjoying the good things you have in the present. To stop worrying, tackle your need for certainty and immediate answers.

- Do you tend to predict bad things will happen just because they are uncertain? What is the likelihood they will?
- Given the likelihood is very low, is it possible to live with the small chance that something negative may happen.
- Ask your friends and family how they cope with uncertainty in specific situations. Could you do the same?
- Tune into your emotions. Worrying about uncertainty is often a way to avoid unpleasant emotions. But by tuning into your emotions you can start to accept your feelings, even those that are uncomfortable or don't make sense.