



5 tips to beat the WORRY BUG

A little fretting can do us good but, taken to an extreme, anxiety can make our lives a misery. Psychologist John Aiken explains the upsides of worry – and how to keep unnecessary concern in check

LET ME BEGIN BY SAYING that worry can have its upsides. I remember one occasion in particular when I was plagued by anxiety and concern. I was single and getting ready to go out to a party, where I hoped I might bump into a girl I was keen on. Throughout the day my mind turned to all sorts of troubling thoughts. Would she be there with someone else? Would she say 'yes' when I asked her out? What should I wear? How would the conversation go? Am I even ready for a relationship?

I look back on this now and smile about how nervous I was. My worries were normal everyday concerns that most single people report at some stage of the dating game. In the end, it put me in a state of readiness and excitement, and the great part of it all was that I ended up marrying her! The point is, a certain amount of worry is not only normal, it can even bring about great results.

I remember meeting one top sportsman who admitted he was driven by worries about failure and letting his team down. As a result, he'd take great care with his pre-game preparation. He would religiously follow his routine around diet and exercise, checking his equipment, and keeping to bedtime rituals and travel plans. This allowed him to perform to his maximum every weekend.

As well as allowing you to prepare for situations, worry can also get you to think of others and motivate you to offer help. And it can protect you by alerting you to situations that threaten your safety and wellbeing. It can also get you to focus your attention on a specific task rather than have a broad mindset.

However for some, worry can be a debilitating force. It can consume them and make their daily functioning almost impossible.

A widely used clinician's handbook outlines several criteria for those who suffer from a condition known as Generalised Anxiety Disorder. People with this condition will feel anxious and worried nearly every day, for a period of at least six months. They'll also find it hard to control their worries, and experience at least three of the following symptoms – restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, muscle tension and/or disturbed sleep. Their worrying isn't related to medical conditions or substance use (medication, drug use).

I once met a woman who complained of being in a constant state of worry. She felt on edge the whole time, and had physical symptoms including dry mouth, sweating, irritability, poor sleep, muscle tension and headaches. She admitted she was a perfectionist who tended to fret about making mistakes and not measuring up. She spent her days running around trying to care for family and friends, hold down a part-time job and make her marriage work. She said she had a tendency to blow small things out of proportion and exaggerate the chances of disaster. At times she'd feel so overwhelmed, she would take to her bed for several days.

For people like her, significant work needs to be done to get them on top of their worry. However, for most of us, there are some basic strategies that can help us prevent our worries from getting out of hand.

STEP ONE: Re-frame your thinking

When we get into a state of worry, our mind goes into overdrive. We can exaggerate possible outcomes, think negatively about everyday events and fret about our inability to cope. With this being the case, it's vital that we are able to identify our worrying thoughts, and have strategies to re-frame them and put things into perspective. A general overview of this can be found in the excellent book by Edmund J Bourne – *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* (New Harbinger Publications, \$55.99).

- Start a 'worry journal' and divide it up into three columns per page – Situations, Thoughts and Feelings.
- Throughout the day keep an eye on your thoughts, and when you notice yourself worrying, ask yourself the following: "What was the situation; what were my thoughts at the time; and how did it make me feel?"
- After several weeks, you will be able to see patterns.

Do you worry at certain times of the day? Do particular situations make you panic? What sort of different feelings do you experience? What do you typically do when this happens to you?

- With an understanding of your worrying thoughts, it's now time to challenge them. When you notice that you're starting to worry, use questions like:
 - How can I look at things differently to calm me down?
 - Why is this untrue?
 - Where's the evidence for this?
 - Has this always happened in the past?
 - What's the worst thing that can happen and how likely is this to occur?
 - What would I say to my best friend to make them less worried about this?
- Prepare flashcards with your key questions on them. If you start to get overwhelmed, refer to the cards to put your mind at ease.



STEP TWO: Attack procrastination

Worry and indecision typically go hand-in-hand. When you worry a lot it can shut you down and make you avoid taking action on outstanding issues. An important part of dealing with worry is identifying your issues and addressing them rather than procrastinating.

- On a page at the back of your worry journal write down the left hand side of the margin the following headings: Friends, Family, Relationship, Finance, Living Arrangements, Health and Fitness, and Work.
- Next to each heading ask yourself: "What am I avoiding in this area that I need to deal with?" For instance, you might be avoiding breaking up with your current partner, closing a bank account, moving flats, joining a gym, or asking for a promotion.
- Now write each of these 'to do' items on a separate page in order of priority. Next to each one put a deadline in brackets that keeps you focused. Then as you address each outstanding issue, cross it off your list and move to the next one.
- In the future, if your worry is starting to get on top of you, go through the same process again and add new issues to your list that need to be addressed.

STEP THREE: Limit your worry

Sometimes it can be helpful to put limits around your worry. In a sense, you're acknowledging that worry is going to happen to you but that there are strategies you can use to keep it under control.

- Schedule worry sessions. This strategy gives you certain periods during your day when you're allowed to worry. Start by putting aside 15 minutes in the morning and then at night where you turn your attention to worrying about everything and anything. Outside of these times, however, you stay in the present. If you feel tempted to worry, just remind yourself you have a specific time set aside for this later.
- Distract yourself. This strategy enables you to put to one side your worries and focus on something else. It can be very helpful in short-term situations that provoke great anxiety – say, travelling in a train, being in an elevator or standing in a crowded supermarket. In these situations, try focusing on a distraction task – counting backwards, concentrating on your breathing, imagining yourself in a calm setting, describing the colours/furniture in the room, or putting headphones on and listening to music.

STEP FOUR: Relax

A key part of managing your worry is learning to relax. A number of options are discussed in the superb book by Gavin Andrews, *The Treatment of Anxiety Disorders* (Cambridge University Press, \$198.99) and in a very helpful site, www.helpguide.org. The important thing is to fully master a particular technique and then practise it daily.

- Deep breathing: Teaches you to focus on breathing in a controlled way with your stomach.
- Progressive relaxation: Gets you to focus on tensing and relaxing the different muscle groups.
- Visualisation: You close your eyes, breathe in a controlled way, and then imagine a calming scene. Once there, start to focus on all your senses – touch, smell, sounds and so on.
- Massage: Involves manipulating parts of the body to get a sense of deep relaxation and release tension.
- Meditation: Teaches you to focus on various points, such as breathing, a sound, an object, a movement, or a particular scene, bringing calmness and relaxation.

STEP FIVE: Create a balanced lifestyle

If you're struggling to cope with your daily schedule, then you are naturally going to worry about mistakes, letting people down, running out of time, and being disliked. So it's important to put in place steps that maintain balance and control in your life.

- Exercise is a simple and effective way of achieving a sense of wellbeing. Make a point of doing at least 30 minutes of exercise – be it walking, swimming or visiting the gym – every day. It's not only great for your health, but it also ensures you get time for yourself.
- A healthy diet is great for giving you balance. This also relates to your alcohol intake. If you're not sure what's good for you, see a nutritionist.
- Socialise regularly. Often people who worry too much withdraw from their social network – which of course only gives them more time to sit around in isolation and think! Schedule a weekly catch-up with friends, whether face-to-face or by phone. It's not only fun, but friends can give you perspective and reassurance.
- Pencil in time every week for your hobbies and interests so that you're prioritising fun and relaxation. It doesn't matter how long you spend on them, it's simply important that they occur. It can be anything: Reading, movies, writing or even listening to music. ☐