

The Problem of Worry

Worry is a normal and universal human experience. From major life decisions to minor tasks, we may have recurring worrisome thoughts, become alarmed, and often predict the worst possible consequences.

Sometimes, we worry/perceive danger and threat where there is none, and anticipate things to be worse than they really are. At other times, we are more realistic in our assessment of dangers or threats and typically experience less worry.

Excessive worry is seldom productive.

- It tends to involve uncontrolled mental activity. That is, we do it even at times when we would rather not.
- It usually causes emotional distress. So, rather than thinking clearly about the problems and generating helpful solutions, we tend to focus only on how bad the situation is and the possible negative outcomes of the situation.
- It uses a great deal of physical and mental energy without anything being accomplished. In other words, worry usually does not push us toward productive behavior, but only toward more worry, which can decrease our quality of life and how we function.
- Worry can also impact sleep. Often it is only after we are free from the daytime distractions and we settle down to sleep that our minds begin to focus on various problems and concerns. It is difficult to simultaneously worry and be relaxed enough to fall asleep.
- Eliminating all worry is not the goal. However, one can easily learn the skills needed to manage excessive worry and decrease its impact. Three such techniques are *worry times*, *facing worry*, and *worry logs*.

Worry Times

Worry Times: A “worry time” is simply a scheduled period of time, perhaps 30 minutes, during which you think about your problems and concerns. Limiting how long and when you worry frees up your other time throughout the day. It is best to have your “worry time” at least a couple of hours before bedtime so that you can allow yourself to wind down prior to bed.

1. Find a quiet place to sit. This place should be free of distractions and interruptions. As you sit and relax, write down each worry or concern that comes into your head. Do not try to edit out what you might see as little concerns or “silly” worries. If it occurs to you at all, write it down.
2. When you have written down all your worries, begin to categorize the worries into piles if you used cards or paper or into labeled sections if you used electronic media. This will help you establish more order to the problems which helps with worry management. Choose categories that are helpful for you. There is no right or wrong set of category labels. You might organize them into categories labeled “Big Concerns, Medium Concerns,” and “Small Concerns.” Another example would be to categorize them by content area, such as “Work Concerns,” “Family Concerns,” “Financial Concerns,” and “Relationship Concerns.” Any means of categorizing can be used, however it is important not to use too many categories; usually between three and seven works best.
3. Once the worries are in categories, write next to each one how you might manage the problem. If the problem is something you have absolutely no control over, you might write down “I’m not going to worry about this problem because there is nothing I can do about it right now.”

Regular use of worry time allows you to “delay” your periods of worry and consolidate your worrying into a smaller period of time during the day (i.e., allowing yourself to focus on your worries for 30 minutes each evening, rather than spread throughout the day). Another goal of worry time is to process each problem to some extent and make a decision on what you will do about it so you can free your mind of it.

Finally, worry time allows you to practice turning worrisome thoughts “on” and “off.” You may even find that some of the things on your mind are not worries, but more like things to put on a “To Do” list. If this is the case, consider writing your “To Do” list every day at the beginning of your worry time so that you aren’t compelled to remember these items.

Facing Your Worry

A second technique for managing worry is to use imagery. One way to use imagery is to distract your mind from your worries by imagining something else, such as a pleasant memory or scene. While this can be helpful in achieving a state of physical relaxation and for providing short-term relief from your worries, it does little for resolving your worries in the long run.

An alternative to this is to use mental imagery to picture the situation you are most worried about. Your first reaction to this may be, *“This is what I do anyway. It will only worsen the problem!”*

Actually, when we worry, our mind tends to rapidly jump from image to image; racing from one terrible, awful scenario to another maintains our high level of worry. When we stop this mental game of “leapfrog” and simply focus on one bad scene for an extended period of time, we begin to get less distressed by the scene and the worry we feel in response to the scene weakens.

Our perceptions of threat can change as we face the source of our fear. For example, if I am frightened by snakes but force myself to sit in a room with a snake for several hours, I will eventually feel more relaxed around the snake. During the time spent with the snake, I will likely have reevaluated my thoughts about the degree of danger that snake represents to me. I also will have simply tired of being frightened. This is what can happen to your worry when you use the imagery technique to manage your worry.

The following imagery exercise is best done well before bedtime so that it does not interrupt your sleep.

1. Pick something you are worried about and think about the worst possible outcome of that worry.
2. Concentrate on this mental image, allowing the image to be as vivid and real as you can.
3. Rate the worry you feel while imagining this scene on a 1 to 10 scale, with 1 being low worry and 10 being extreme worry. If your worry rating is less than 5, you should continue to think of even worse possible outcomes.
4. Now keep this image in your mind for at least 25-30 minutes (or until your level of worry/anxiety decreases to a low level, such as 3 or below on 1 to 10 scale)
5. During this time you can generate a list of alternatives to the worst possible outcome, or practice a relaxation technique to reduce muscle tension, but do not lose the image.

As you practice this procedure, you will likely experience a reduction in the degree of worry you have about this problem. You can now repeat the process with other worries that arise.

Worry Log

A final technique you may want to try to control worry is a worry log. It is simpler than the imagery exercise and it may be helpful.

- When you find you are over-focused on thoughts of tasks that need to be completed or issues that need to be dealt with, it can be helpful to write these things on a list.
- Don't be concerned with categorizing the worries or finding solutions. Simply generate a list.
- The idea of the worry log is to transfer the thoughts that are going through your head onto paper so they can be dealt with at a more opportune time.
- Often, worry is maintained by an underlying belief that if we stop thinking about an issue, even for a minute, we will forget about it forever, and something important will go undone. Although this belief is generally untrue, making a list in your worry log can relieve you of that concern.

Steps for SOLVE

When you take the time to think about problems or concerns in your life, it is helpful to think about them in a constructive way. The SOLVE technique described below will help you to develop effective solutions to problems you are worried about.

State the problem

Outline the problem

List possible solutions

View the consequences

Execute your solution

Read through the SOLVE steps that are outlined below.

1. State the problem.

The first step to solving problems is to identify what they are. Once you've identified a problem, rate how much of a problem it is for you on a 0 to 10 scale, where 0 is "not at all a problem" and 10 is "very much a problem."

2. Outline the problem.

Outline the specific aspects of the problem. Include information such as:

- a) who was there,
- b) where did it occur,
- c) when did it happen,
- d) what led up to the event,
- e) what happened after the event, and
- f) how did you respond to the event.

How you responded to the situation is important. Why? Because many times you can't change what happens but often *you can change how you respond* to what happens. The goal of SOLVE is to try to find new and better ways of responding to problem situations.

Outlining the problem may be the most important part of the SOLVE exercise. Accurately describing a problem often helps reveal good solutions. Be sure to ask yourself what role you are playing in the problem. Pay special attention to how your thoughts may be contributing to the problem or making it worse. This can be a difficult step. The point is not to make yourself feel guilty or give yourself a hard time, but to help you to realize that there is a lot you can do to resolve the problem.

3. List possible solutions.

The goal here is to think of many possible solutions. Be careful not to start evaluating any of the solutions before you have finished listing possible options. Evaluation will lead to criticism, and criticism might stop you from thinking of possible solutions before you have discovered the best one. Here are some guidelines to help you generate as many ideas as you can:

- a) *Be creative and willing to give “off the cuff” solutions.* Don't be afraid to come up with unlikely or unusual suggestions. At a second glance, the “unlikely” solution may be the most likely to succeed.
- b) *Quantity is best.* The more ideas you can generate the greater the chance that you'll come up with a solution that will work well.
- c) *Combine and improve your ideas.* Go back over your list to see if any of your ideas can be grouped together. Sometimes a combination of solutions is your best bet.
- d) *Consider changing your reactions as a possible solution.* Sometimes problem situations cannot be resolved or the solution takes a long time to be effective. In either of these cases, helpful solutions often include doing things to change how you are reacting to situation.

4. **View the consequences.**

After you have listed the solutions, then decide which one is best. Examine the possible positive and negative consequences of each solution. Make some notes on what these consequences are. It may help to ask yourself questions like these:

- a) Is this a long-term or a short-term solution? What will happen in the short-run if I carry out this solution? What will happen in the long-run?
- b) Will more good come from this solution than harm?
- c) How will this solution affect other people?
- d) How likely is it that I really can carry out this solution?
- e) How will I feel if I choose this solution? Might I regret it? Will I be proud of myself?
- f) Will this solution only partly solve the problem? Will it completely get rid of the problem?

Try to come up with at least one positive and one negative consequence of each possible solution. After you have carefully considered the possible solutions, choose the best one.

When viewing possible solutions, you should try to be optimistic. An important purpose of SOLVE is to encourage you to think of solutions you may not have considered before and to help you try something new. Being negative or pessimistic will reduce your chances of carrying out new solutions.

When trying to change your behavior, it can be very helpful to have the support of your family or your friends. It's often a good idea to take the time to talk to a friend or a loved one about the changes you are trying to make. You can ask them to help you generate solutions to your problem situation. Or you can ask them for feedback about a solution you have chosen. Knowing that someone you trust and can depend on agrees with your choice can help you have confidence in your decision. It's nice to have someone to depend on for help in case everything doesn't work out just right. And it's nice to have someone to share your accomplishments with when things go well.

5. Execute your solution.

This is the toughest part of the exercise. Before actually trying to carry out your solution, go over it in your mind. Try to anticipate any possible road blocks so that you won't get discouraged if things don't work out.

When you're ready, execute your solution. Then write down some notes on how things turned out. Is the problem situation less stressful? How satisfied are you with the outcome? Then rate your problem again using the same scale you used in step 1. If you're not satisfied, try going back over steps 2, 3, and 4, and select a different solution. Then try again.