

How to stop worrying

Relevant to: Anxiety:  Irritability/Anger:  General emotional control:  Depression: 

Worry can work well for you, but it can also work heavily against you unless you know how to tame it.

Worry famously drives people to distraction when it gets out of hand, so it's important to know the 6 top methods for dealing with it. What happens during worry is that the emotional brain (the limbic system and, especially, the amygdala) generate a level of emotion that can virtually 'hijack' the rest of the brain. The result is that you cannot think properly, cannot enjoy things properly, etc. The 6 top methods for fighting back are:

1. Action.

Sometimes your worry is trying to tell you something. For instance, if you have an exam coming up, then the best way of reducing your worry is to work hard to pass the exam. If your finances are a bit shaky and you feel worried about your spending, then the best way to reduce your worry is to reduce your spending. In these cases your worry is working well for you, and the best thing you can do is to (a) listen to it and (b) act on it.

2. Distraction.

Other times the worry is 'unrealistic'. For example you've got sufficient money for your lifestyle, and yet you are worried about your finances. Or you have a good faithful partner, but you are worrying that they are betraying you. In both of these cases 'distraction' is one good answer. This means deliberately involving yourself in something else: a hobby, a film, having a good time with your partner, etc. Anything will do, so long as you totally immerse yourself in it. Note: some music – music that you find calming – can be an excellent distraction, especially as it talks directly to the primitive emotional brain. Similarly, taking a break and passively observing your breathing.

3. Environment.

Look at and listen to your environment. Gillian Reynolds tells us that when people retired from the BBC they were advised not to listen to more than one News broadcast per day as "it could seriously play on the nerves, especially if you have little to occupy yourself with". Homely advice, and with some truth in it; it would be surprising if an unremitting catalogue of dangers surrounding us didn't have some effect. Some people can have the same effect, constantly alerting you to ambient 'dangers'. Visually, looking around the room and seeing all the things you should have done can have a similar effect.

4. Biology.

- Make sure you're not having too much caffeine. This is mainly in coffee, tea and Cola drinks. There are also large amounts in some painkillers (read the ingredients), and if you eat a lot of plain chocolate.
- Exercise is important, and doesn't have to be especially energetic. Regular daily walks of about 20 minutes is the minimum.
- Sleep is important too, and can be difficult when you worry too much: see the separate information on sleep.
- Alcohol, although used as an informal anxiolytic (anxiety reducer), usually works badly, giving immediate relief but subsequent worsening as it attacks the body's B vitamins.

5. Regaining Your Perspective.

Examine the evidence for your worries. Accept only the evidence that a court of law would accept. First of all look at the evidence for your worst fears - for example that you're going to get thrown out of your house because you are so financially disorganised. Then be sure to look at the evidence against those fears. Then come to a good, balanced perspective. (e.g. "I'm not going to get thrown out of my house, but my finances are in a mess and I do need to sort them.") Make sure you write all this down.

6. Problem Solving.

But supposing things are as bad as you fear? Then you're into **problem solving**. Write down all your possible options, make sure you include every possible one. Then simply choose the one you like best, or the one that is least bad. TIP: sometimes it's a good idea to get someone else to help you do this. (In the above example - finances so bad that eventually you'll be thrown out of your house - what are the person's options?)

In session.

Of the 6 worry-reduction methods listed, which ones suit you best?

TIP: The ones that suit you best may or may not be the ones you use at the moment. Consider the question with 'a fresh mind'.

Discuss with your neighbour and the whole group. Work out how you will use your chosen method(s) in preparation for the project below.

Your Chosen Method(s):

Project.

Practise using the method(s) you have identified. Be prepared to tell the group how you get on if you want to, next time.

Mythbuster.

"If you're born a worrier there's nothing you can do about it."

Not true. The kind of methods we've listed here are known to be very effective. It's largely a matter of habit - keeping on doing the best things.