

Compassionate tools to worry better to stress less

"I've had a lot of worries in my life, most of which never happened." ~Mark Twain

There is much to worry about. We worry about our personal situation such as our health, our work situation, our finance, our family, our children, our relationships, our friends, our safety, the food we eat and so on. We can also worry about the state of the world, the economy, the environment, the politics and so on. There is always something we can worry about.



Worrying is not all bad, although it does not feel that good. Healthy compassionate ways of worrying alert us to actual threats and danger and trigger us to act to clarify problems, to obtain more information, to better problem solve.

We can find a balance between healthy worrying from unhelpful thinking leading to excessive anxiety. Worrying done well can help us improve all areas of our lives. When we use compassionate tools to worry better, we can problem-solve effectively and find the motivation to act in ways that are beneficial for ourselves and others. Constructive worrying allows us:

- to take positive actions to take care of ourselves and others,
- to seek help as needed,
- to prevent or be prepared for negative experiences
- to develop a greater appreciation for positive experiences.

In this handout, there are more advanced mindfulness and visualisation practices so be patient and kind with yourself as you are exploring each exercise, being mindful and completing the steps at your own pace.

The cost of unhealthy worrying

Over worrying is very costly physically, mentally as well as financially. Often, we over anticipate that something will go wrong and we over-prepare for it. So, we can look back and wish that we had worried less. As we know, most of the time, what we were worried about, actually, never happened. When we excessively worry, we suffer mentally and physically and experience physical tension, inadequate sleep, irritability, fatigue, poor concentration and lack of flexibility. Over worrying cause ineffective problem-solving mostly because of our inability to see the bigger picture with accuracy.

While we are thinking about our struggles, the body automatically engages in the physiological responses of stress of fight, flight and freeze. The body does not make the difference between our fearful thoughts or actual fearful events and will react to our worrying as if it is really happening. Therefore as we learn to manage our thoughts, we can begin to regulate our physiological stress responses.

If worrying is so problematic, why do we do it?

Worrying has survival value. Our ancestors survived because they worried. When we worry, we use our higher cognitive function to imagine, to anticipate potential dangers, so we could develop ways to avoid them. Therefore, worry can help us to anticipate and problem solve. However, we can over worry when we dwell on the problem and focus unduly on what we don't want to happen. We become mesmerized by our fears unable to pull away: all our attention is in on this scenario that we fear, feeding further stories of negative unwanted outcomes. Worse yet, we start to believe our

improbable stories of what is unlikely to ever happen. It seems the more we repeat the fearful scenario in our mind, the more we start to believe it and it sorts of becomes a 'future' fact. This is not our fault. This is just the way our brain is wired. We have a tricky brain but, fortunately, we can re-wire it.

The downside of worrying

In the anticipated problematic situation we hope for a positive outcome but fear the worst. The emotion of fear hijacks our attention. Our sincere wish is to restore a sense of control, by planning for success. However, we get pulled again and again by the fearful stories of unhappy outcomes which then can become self-fulfilling prophecies, which is the opposite of what we set out to do.

When we are worried about something happening in the future, we dwell on the "what if" and how we would deal with anticipated problems, trying to control the situation as best as we can. And then often the worrying seems to pay off and we believed that we avoided the worst by thinking about it. We may believe that if we expect the worst then we are better prepared for disappointments.

Are we really safer if we worry and plan for the worst scenario?

Imagining the worst scenario over and over is not helpful because we start to engage the stress response and experience anxiety which then affect us physiologically and psychologically. In the anxiety state, our emotional brain is on overdrive at the expense of our cognitive brain. We use our brain differently when we are calm than when we are stressed. When we are over-worried and stressed, our thinking has a narrow focus, limited perspectives and is more rigid. When we are relaxed we are more open, being curious, exploring perspectives, being more flexible using the evolved thinking capacity of the frontal cortex to imagine, to predict, and to plan for the future to effectively problem solve.

Taking care of the worrier

When we worry there is three focus of attention: the subject of the worry, the experience of worrying and the state of the worrier, the person who is doing the worry.

In our mind, we can shift our focus of attention in order to help us to gain perspective. We can begin to attend to ourselves 'the worrier' who is doing the worrying with kindness. We can explore the content of our mind, stepping back from our thoughts, exploring the feelings and calming our body.

We can't always prevent that something will go wrong. We might still be late for an important meeting, or get sick or make a mistake at work or be rejected by someone we care about. We can't always control the events in our lives but we have the power to manage our reactions to them. We can trust that we can handle it when something is not as successful as we would have hoped for.

We need to keep in mind how much of the situation that we worry about is under our direct control. When it comes to looking at the subject of worry, we need to remember that we can't change people. We may try to influence or persuade others but in the end, it is their decision to make those changes or not. Just like we don't want to be dominated, we respect that others have the same wishes. We can't change people but we can be compassionate and love them as best as we can, again like we would wish others to treat us. It is also our responsibility to act when needed to protect and keep ourselves safe from harm.

The serenity phrase reminds us of three helpful attitudes when we worry, depending on our ability to control the situation or not:

"May I have the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change what I can and the wisdom to know the difference."

When is worry helpful?

Worry is helpful when we become aware of our thinking about a problematic situation that is under our control, and instead of rehashing the problem in our mind, we begin to explore possible realistic solutions, to begin problem-solving. Often when we think about a problem, we may exaggerate the possibilities of something going wrong, so we can aim, instead to be more realistic. We can become more self-aware, to choose to think in ways that are effective, so we have choices on how we can respond.

Listen for "I can't" to turn on "I can"

We can become aware of our self-talk. When we are worried the "I can't" can insidiously expand in our stories so it becomes an insurmountable problem. Instead, we notice and begin to look at ways that "we can" asking yourself: "what can I do?" and adding: "I can", "I can handle this", "I can problem-solve". We can't control the future but we can trust that we will be able to handle the situation as best as we can. We have done it in the past and we can do it in the future. It also helps to be flexible in our expectations so we can adjust better to the events as they unfold.

The inner critic can overly remind us that we are inadequate and not good enough. So we need to keep in check excessive inner criticisms that are discouraging and shaming. We can begin to talk to ourselves like we would talk to a good friend, in encouraging ways that remind us of our strengths, of our abilities and of our good intentions. In our mind, we can also remember times when we were successful to help us to be more confident. When we attend to ourselves with acceptance, understanding and self-compassion we uncover our courage.

The 9-steps compassionate worrying strategy

Worry consists largely of our attempt to problem solve a difficult situation in our mind. We can learn to worry better to restore a sense of balance and control, to stress less and experience more ease.

There are many ways to worry well. Here is a nine-step strategy that you can follow when you feel you are beginning to over-worry.

1. Calm the mind and the body. Using mindfulness, breathing, grounding practices and relaxation exercises where you can pause and become present attending to yourself as a friend.

2. Separate productive thoughts from unproductive ones. Effective ways of working through your worries are by focussing on what is solvable and within your ability to control. Become curious, asking yourself four questions about the way you are thinking at the moment.

- Is it true?
- Is it helpful?
- Am I being kind to myself or others?
- Is this way of thinking pointing to a solution?

3. Set your intention.

- What is your motivation here?
- What is the personal core value that you wish to express in this situation?

For instance, confirming within yourself your intention to be helpful.

4. Ask for help. You don't have to keep on struggling on our own. When you are unsure, it is good to reach out, to ask help from a trusted friend or a colleague. Some professionals can help you with their special expertise. You can pause, be still a moment, breathe and ask your inner knowing: "What should I do?" and trust that you will know what to do in time.

5. Offer yourself and others some loving-kindness phrases in this situation. That is, you can wish yourself and others what you are hoping for in this situation like you would wish it for a friend such as:

"May I have peace", "May I live in harmony", "May I be as healthy as I can be", "May I be happy", "May I accept myself as I am", "May I have courage" and so on...

You can change the pronoun such as *"may you"* or *"may we"*, wishing it to others as well.

6. Visualise the successful outcome in your mind, rehearse what you want to achieve in this situation, that is, for the benefit of everyone.

7. Spend some time being grateful for the possible positive outcome. We can be thankful for the opportunities to have experiences where we are challenged and learn. We can also appreciate situations where we have the chance to commit to our values such as being grateful to be able to care or help others.

8. See yourself when the situation is over. If it is a party, visualise cleaning up, if it is a job interview, imagine driving home after the interview. Explore how you feel and congratulate yourself for going through this and enjoy the possible positive outcome, always being realistic.

9. Act in line with your resolve to ensure your success. So if you need to complete a project by a certain time, make a realistic plan and write a time-table so you can complete it in that time.

To sum up:

1. Pause, calm our mind and body with kindness, becoming mindful,
2. Explore our intentions in the situation.
3. Ask for internal or external help, open to the inner source of wisdom.
4. Talk to ourselves in an encouraging way, like we would talk to a friend.
5. Repeat loving-kindness phrases for ourselves and others to further orient our mind towards a positive vision of what we wish to achieve for the benefit of everyone.
6. Visualise a happy outcome
7. Feel grateful for the opportunity to learn, to become stronger
8. Take practical actions to achieve our goal and feel confident of a positive outcome

Conclusion

When you notice that you are worrying unduly, be kind to yourself and decide to be constructive about it. There is no need to criticise yourself for worrying. We all worry, it is what all human beings do, we just need to do it wisely.

Remember worrying is not all bad! There is a lot of good things associated with worries, it is good to plan, to anticipate but the aim is to do it in a balanced and effective way for a better outcome and to thrive in the process. Remember some worry or anxiety is motivating, but too much is counterproductive. By worrying better you can be very constructive and create positive changes. Enjoy successful worrying where you find a middle ground and exciting new solutions.

Important note:

Worrying better is about balance. We need to worry a little to ensure our safety, to avoid danger but if we worry too much we may decide to stay home. We know that when we worry too much in our mind the danger is amplified, we feel anxiety which then interferes with our ability to think clearly, and problem-solve effectively.

How do we know when we have crossed the line from helpful worrying to unhelpful rumination?

It is important to recognize that “worry” and “anxiety” are closely related, but different psychological states. If you feel overwhelmed by your worries and feel that your anxiety is difficult to bear and interfere with your day to day functioning, you should seek help from a health professional. You can approach your GP for an assessment for a possible referral to a psychologist who can help you to adopt strategies to reduce your anxiety.

This advice is of a general nature only and does not take into account particular conditions. For further assistance contact a general practitioner or psychologist.

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