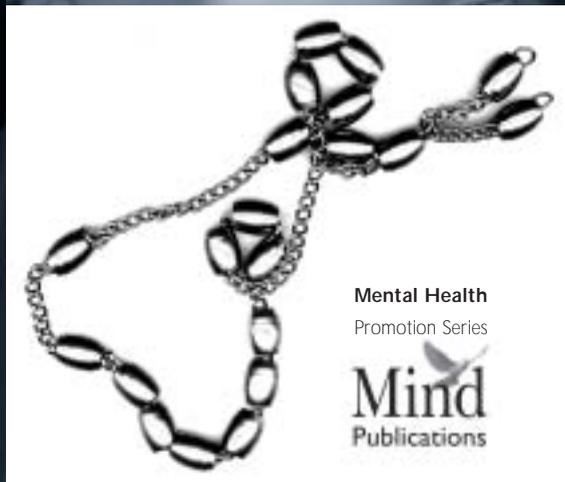


HOW TO ... stop worrying



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HOW TO... stop worrying



“I think of myself as a born worrier. I’ve always worried, ever since I was little. I’d worry about what people at school thought about me and about homework and all sorts of things.”

“I worry so much that for my last birthday a friend bought me a plaque with the slogan ‘Worrying is like riding a rocking horse – it doesn’t get you anywhere’.”

“As a child, every night when I went to bed I would worry about members of my family dying. I am not religious but I ended up saying a prayer each night that was basically a list of my worries, which I asked God to take care of. This helped me to go to sleep. As I grew up the list of worries became so long that I used to worry about going to bed. The ‘prayer’ took so long and there was so much to remember. In the end it was a worry off my mind when I stopped saying the prayer.”

Almost everybody worries. A certain amount of worrying is a healthy response to life. It can prevent us from being reckless, or stimulate us to do our best or to take control of a situation. But some people worry a lot more than others and sometimes to the point where worrying becomes a problem in itself. This booklet explains the problem and its effects, suggests ways of tackling it and how to find more help.

What is worrying?

Worrying means spending a lot of time thinking about bad things – being preoccupied with negative possibilities. The more you worry the larger your worries become. You may even find yourself worrying about all the time you have spent worrying. There are many different types of worries; they include worries about things that might happen in the future, worrying about things that are actually taking place, and retrospective worry about events that have already passed.



Worries about what might happen

These worries include concerns about things that could possibly happen, and things that very probably won't happen. For example, despite the fact that it is statistically unlikely, you may worry about whether you will have a car accident, or catch a fatal disease. Worries about what might happen in situations over which you have some control can also be very troubling. You might be very worried that you're going to fail an exam or not meet a deadline because of not putting in enough work. If you were able to stop worrying and do some work, the outcome might be better.

Worries about things that are happening

Again, these can include feelings of anxiety both about situations that you can change, and those you are powerless to change. Examples of the latter would be worrying about the fact that you are caught in traffic, or that your train has been delayed. An example of the former would be worrying about a persistent cough; if you go to the doctor your mind could be put at rest, or you could get treatment; both are better than worrying.

Worries about things that have happened

There is often nothing that can be done about these worries. An example of this would be worrying about whether you have failed an exam, or made a mistake at work.

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Why do we worry?

“I think my worrying has a lot to do with my lack of self-confidence. Although it’s hard to admit, it’s often easier for me to worry about something than to do something about it. Over the years I’ve learnt that the less time I give myself to worry, and the quicker I act, the better. I may feel ill before I make that phone call and shake a bit afterwards but when it’s over I feel so much better, having blasted a worry – however small – into oblivion.”

Worries are basically fears. Everyone gets scared, but we all handle fear in different ways. Sometimes it is easier to dwell on a fear than to do something about it, or to accept that there is nothing to be done. This may be because of a lack of confidence – we may not believe we are capable of taking action or handling a bad situation. (If this seems to be the case for you, you might find Mind’s booklet *How to Assert Yourself* useful; for details see *Further Reading* on p.14.)



What effects can worry have?

Physical effects

Our bodies react chemically to the fear that worrying entails. When we are scared our bodies release adrenalin in what is called a ‘fight or flight’ reflex that evolved to enable us to counter or to escape threats. This adrenalin affects the digestive system, and can make you feel ill. The more you worry the worse it gets, and a real ‘rush’ of adrenalin can lead to ‘butterflies in the stomach’, a headache, or feeling very sick and unable to eat.

Psychological effects

Worrying can make it very difficult to go to sleep, as worries often come on at their strongest at night. When you’re trying to go to sleep there’s nothing to distract you from the worries that may have been lurking in the background. It is then very easy to start feeling anxious about the sleep you are missing

through having these thoughts. In addition, at night, especially if alone, it is easier for concerns to get out of perspective, and of course harder to do something about them. We also worry more when we are tired. (If worrying affects your sleep, you may find Mind's booklet *How to Cope with Sleep Problems* helpful; see *Further Reading* on p.14.)

Worries can make you feel very helpless; the more worries you have the less able you feel to cope with them. This reduces confidence and makes us more vulnerable to feelings of anxiety. A lack of self-confidence can affect how people relate to you, and how you feel in response. In this way a kind of negative spiral sets in, and some people experience panic attacks as a result of the build-up of these kind of feelings. (See *Useful Organisations* p.12 and *Further Reading* p.11 for help with panic attacks.)

Worries also make it very difficult to concentrate and carry on with everyday life, so that problems build up. It can be very emotionally draining to feel constantly anxious. Sometimes it can feel as though worries have taken over your life. In order to assert some sort of control, some people may develop behaviour that could be described as obsessional. An example of this would be checking that a door was locked many times before being able to leave the house. Some people may also develop eating disorders as a way to control their anxiety (see *Further Reading* on p.14.)

Is worrying ever helpful ?

" Many people think that worrying is a complete waste of time. Personally I don't think that's true. It seems to me that if I worry and think about the worst that could possibly happen the outcome is rarely as bad as I've imagined."



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If something is 'niggling' at you and you try to disregard it but it keeps bringing itself to your attention, this can be a helpful push to do something about it. For example, you might have a mole on your skin that you are worried about; you try to ignore it but can't, and this forces you to visit the doctor. Sometimes worry makes us act and this can be positive. Also, worrying about the worst that could happen can help us to deal with and prepare for what does take place.

The adrenalin that is sometimes released through worrying can be helpful. For example, if someone is worried about a race they are about to take part in, the adrenalin might give them the extra push they need to succeed. However, if they get too worried it could mean that they feel ill and unable to perform.

Having the occasional worry for a short period of time is very different to worrying about several things every day or having a worry that seems to dominate everything. These worries can make us too anxious to be able to think and act in a useful way – and this is when the worries themselves become the problem.



How can I help myself to stop worrying?

Confronting the worst that could happen

It can be useful to visualise the worst thing that could happen in any worrying situation. Often a worry is a fear of the unknown, and trying to define that fear can help overcome it. Having confronted the worry or fear for what it is, it is sometimes easier to know what to do about a situation. If you confront the worst that could happen you can then look at how you could cope, what you could do and who you could turn to.

Talking

“When I was a child, my mum really helped with my worrying. She would notice when I was quiet and when I couldn’t eat because of the butterflies in my stomach and she’d take me to one side. She’d ask me what was wrong and suddenly facing the worries with someone else really helped. She could help me to see which ones didn’t matter and what I could do about others.”



Some people find that talking to someone about their worries really helps. Simply bouncing a worry off another person can help to put it into perspective; you may realise that even the worst possible outcome really isn’t the end of the world. Talking about worries can also help when trying to think of a possible course of action to take, as discussion can often throw up solutions or actions that we can’t formulate on our own.

You may feel the need to talk about your worries with someone who is not involved in your life. For example, you might want to try talking to a counsellor. Counselling can help you to gain understanding of your worries and their effects, and it can also support you in doing something about them. Another kind of therapy that can be effective in dealing with worries is cognitive-behavioural therapy, which looks practically at the ways in which our thought processes affect our lives, and how we can try to solve the problems they cause by learning to alter destructive patterns of thought (see *Further Reading*, p. 14).

People who have a religious faith can find praying useful in dealing with their worries.

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Writing worries down

It can help to try writing down all your worries. Some people find it more useful to write their worries as statements rather than questions. So for example 'What will happen if I don't get there on time?' might be more usefully expressed 'I am worried that I won't get there on time.' In this way it is possible to focus on precisely what the fear is.

As we have seen, people often worry about events that are very unlikely to happen. It is often difficult to realise just how unlikely something is when you are preoccupied with it. It might be a good idea to keep your list of worries for a while, before going back to it after a few weeks. You may find that you can cross out some worries, because the event that you were worried about didn't happen or because the worry simply isn't important any more. Of course, you might feel you have a whole new set to replace them with, but if you keep writing them down and then going back to the lists you may see that worries can just 'dissolve'. Some people find that it helps to tear up, burn or otherwise destroy the piece of paper on which they have written their worries. Another constructive way to put worries into perspective is to try to write down the reasons why something bad might not happen. This may help you to see more realistically which situations are worthy of worry, and which are not.

Prioritising and taking action

There is often something we can do about a situation we feel anxious about. Consider each preoccupying thought one by one, and then consider whether there is something that could be done about it. Make a list of these possible actions, with the actions for the most concerning worries at the top. It can then be possible to work slowly through the list, concentrating on one thing at a time. Cross out the action once it has been completed, to reflect the fact that you have acted positively and dealt with a worry.

If you're not sure what would be the best action to take, you could try making a list of possible actions along with their advantages and disadvantages. As well as helping you make a decision, this could help you feel more confident about what you decide to do.

Asserting yourself

You may feel that there is something that you could do about a particular worry but that you are not confident enough to do it. In this instance self-assertiveness classes may help. (See, also, Mind's booklets *How to Assert Yourself*, details on p.14).

Controlling worries

You could try allocating certain times and places to your worries. For this to work it is important to be strict, and not let worries intrude on your thoughts at other times. It might be helpful to try to visualise a box to put your worries in that you can open at a later date or time. Some people set aside, say, thirty minutes a day for worrying, taking quite literally the phrase 'I'll worry about that later'. It is helpful if you set this period at the same time of the day/week, and have it in the same place.

Relaxation

Relaxation exercises are useful in dealing with anxious feelings, often involving trying to replace negative worrying thoughts with positive ones. This can include imagining somewhere you would like to be – an ideal beach, garden or home. You could also try seeing your worries as actual objects that you can discard – for example, stones that you can throw into the water. Unfortunately, trying to do a relaxation exercise can in itself be worrying. You might feel that it's not working or that you're doing it wrong. It's best to take the attitude that you're just 'giving it a go' and that these negative thoughts are normal. It may sound surprising, but relaxation can take a lot of practice sometimes.

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When you are about to go into a situation that worries you, such as a doctor's appointment or a job interview, it can be useful to focus on something other than the problem in hand. This could be as simple as picking up a good book or listening to a personal stereo. If you feel a worry taking hold you could push it out of your mind by looking at other people and imagining their lives, or by really examining your surroundings in a very detailed way.

Physical exercise

Worrying means we are overly concerned with what's going on in our heads, and exercising can help to focus us on our physical side instead. It can also help to relieve the tension associated with worrying by using up the adrenalin produced. You don't have to go for a long run or to the gym; a good steady walk can be just as effective, and it's good for your heart as well as your head. Worry beads and stress toys can be useful as a kind of 'portable exercise'. They can be used both as a distraction and to relieve tension.

Dietary changes

It helps to cut down on tea, coffee and other caffeine-based drinks such as colas and canned drinks. These are stimulants, and can heighten the physical effects of worries such as headaches and stomach-aches.

Medication

Sometimes antidepressants or minor tranquillisers are prescribed for people, when extreme worrying has manifested itself as anxiety. Both forms of medication have side-effects and minor tranquillisers especially can be addictive. Medication can be effective in easing the burden in times of extreme anxiety, but do not help to get to the root of continuous and perpetual worrying. (See Mind's booklets *Making Sense of Treatments and Drugs: Antidepressants*, *Making Sense of Treatments and Drugs: Minor Tranquillizers* and *Understanding Anxiety*, details on p. 14).

Complementary therapies

A growing number of people use herbal remedies such as the Bach flower remedies, or homeopathic preparations (now available in many high street chemists). There are also physical therapies such as acupuncture, reflexology and aromatherapy which some people find useful. Yoga or meditation classes can be effective. They teach people how to relax their muscles and breathe more deeply in order to control the shallow breathing and rapid heartbeat often associated with worrying. (See *Useful Organisations* overleaf and *Further Reading* on p.14).

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Useful organisations



British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

PO Box 9

Accrington BB5 2GD

tel/fax: 01254 875277

e-mail: info@babcp.com

web: www.babcp.com

Send an SAE for details of practitioners in your area

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

1 Regent Place

Rugby

Warwickshire CV21 2PJ

tel. 0870 443 5252

fax: 0870 443 5160

minicom: 0870 443 5162

e-mail: bacp@bacp.co.uk

web: www.counselling.co.uk

Send an A5 SAE for details of practitioners in your area

Institute for Complementary Medicine (ICM)

PO Box 194

London SE16 7QZ

tel: 020 7237 5165

fax: 020 7237 5175

e-mail: icm@icmedicine.co.uk

web: www.icmedicine.co.uk

Send an SAE for a list of practitioners



No Panic

93 Brands Farm Way
Randlay
Telford
Shropshire TF3 2JQ
helpline: 01952 590545
information line: 0800 7831531
fax: 01952 270962
Offers advice, information and support

Stress Management Training Institute

Foxhills
30 Victoria Avenue
Shanklin
Isle of Wight PO37 6LS
tel. 01983 868166
fax: 01983 866666
e-mail: admin@smti.org
web: www.smti.org
Produces leaflets and cassette tapes on relaxation. List of teachers
also available

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Further reading

- A-Z Complementary and Alternative Therapies* (Mind 2000) £3.50
- The Complete Guide to Mental Health* E. Farrell (Mind/Vermilion 1997) £8.99
- Coping with Anxiety and Depression* S. Trickett (Sheldon Press 1997) £6.99
- Essential Help for your Nerves* Dr Claire Weekes (Thorsons 2000) £8.99
- Factsheet: Counselling* (Mind) 50p
- Factsheet: Cognitive-behaviour therapy* (Mind) 50p
- How to Assert Yourself* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Cope with Panic Attacks* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Cope with Sleep Problems* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Increase your Self-esteem* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to Look After Yourself* (Mind 2000) £1
- Learn to Relax* M. George (Duncan Baird 2000) £10.99 (additional audio-tape £3.99)
- Manage Your Mind: The mental health fitness guide* G. Butler, A. Hope (Oxford University Press 1995) £8.99
- Making Sense of Treatments and Drugs* series (Mind) £3.50 each
- The Mind Guide to Managing Stress* (Mind 2000) £3.50
- The Mind Guide to Yoga* (Mind 2001) £1
- Overcoming Anxiety* H. Kennerley (Robinson 1997) £7.99
- Overcoming Panic* D. Silove, V. Manicavasagar (Robinson 1997) £6.99
- Panic Disorders: The facts* S. Rachman, P. de Silva (Oxford University Press 1996) £10.99
- Understanding Anxiety* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Depression* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Eating Disorders* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Obsessive-compulsive Disorder* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Talking Treatments* (Mind 2000) £1

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- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
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Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 02890 328474



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