

WHAT IS WORRY?

The dictionary defines worry as “a cause of uneasiness, anxiety; trouble” or “to suffer from disturbing thoughts; fret”.¹ According to the encyclopedia, worry is “negative self-talk that often distracts the mind from focusing on the problem at hand”.² Aside from being a fearful distraction, worry acts as a barrier that blocks you from your best self. When you are in a state of intense worry, you have extremely limited access to things like intuition, knowledge, talent, peace, love, and appreciation. Instead, you have increased access to emotions that are more “compatible” with worry, such as anxiety, fear, and depression.

As an example, many people have a tendency to “under perform” while being watched, especially on tasks that are difficult or not fully mastered. This is because fear and anxiety creep in as soon as you start to worry about what others are thinking, and this fear blocks you from your knowledge and skills. However, in the absence of an observer, you’re not worried and then once again have free access to your abilities. As another example, have you ever struggled to find the right words in the middle of a stressful argument, only to have those perfect words come easily after the argument has ended? Worry generates fear, and fear erects barriers that cloud your mind.

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For many of us, worry is a habitual pattern that has been with us for a long time. Although worry always produces unease in the body and mind, it can be so automatic that we may not even realize we are doing it. Keep in mind that the longer an episode of worrying lasts, the more the habit is strengthened. If you can learn to quickly focus away from the worry, you’ll eventually reduce the frequency and duration of your worry episodes.

HOW WORRY AFFECTS THE MIND AND BODY

Since worry always produces stress, its impact can only be understood by examining how stress affects the mind and body, in which case we need to start with the brain. Located deep within the brain, are two almond-shaped groups of neurons called the amygdalas. The amygdala has been shown in research to perform a primary role in the processing and memory of emotional reactions. It is involved in the genesis of many fear responses, including freezing (immobility), rapid heartbeat, increased respiration, and stress-hormone release.³

The amygdala serves an evolutionary purpose and can be thought of as the brain’s “panic button”, which prepares the body for “flight or fight”. When the amygdala activates the panic alarm, it induces a cascade of physiological changes that ends with a flood of stress hormones, mainly Cortisol. Under stress, the body secretes enough hormones for a single bout of fight or flight. However, once secreted, the hormones stay in the body for several hours. So if you have successive upsets, the body keeps adding stress hormones to the levels already there, which produces an additive effect.⁴ That is why sometimes the littlest thing can throw us over the edge, just like the old saying about the “straw that broke the camel’s back”.

Stress hormones impact the body in many ways. One major effect is an increase in blood flow and heart rate. As the heart rate shoots up, blood is shunted away from the brain’s higher cognitive centers to other sites that

1 *dictionary.com*, (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/worry>).

2 *wikipedia.org*, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/worry>).

3 *wikipedia.org*, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/amygdala>).

4 Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 75.

The truth is that worry, especially when excessive, can derail the quality of otherwise loving relationships. As mentioned previously, when you're in a state of worry, you can only experience things "compatible" with worry such as anxiety or panic. It is impossible to experience love, joy, or appreciation in that moment. In other words, you can't be appreciating your child and worrying about him at the same time. The worry will distract your mind from experiencing appreciation. Of course, this does not mean that you do not love your child when you are worrying; it just means that you cannot experience the feeling of love until after the worry subsides.

MYTH #3: WORRYING WILL SOMEHOW HELP THE SITUATION.

RATIONALE: It is important for me to take the time to think through every possibility, even the remote ones. This will ensure that I am "prepared" when things go wrong.

STORY OF THE TWO WOLVES

A Cherokee elder was teaching his grandchildren about life.

He said to them, "A fight is going on inside me... it is a terrible fight between two wolves.

One wolf represents worry, fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, hatefulness, and lies.

The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, humbleness, kindness, friendship, generosity, faith, and truth.

This same fight is going on inside of you, and inside every other person, too."

The children thought about it for a minute. Then one child asked his grandfather,

"Which wolf will win?"

The Cherokee elder replied...

"The one you feed."

[Cherokee Legend - author unknown]

We may unconsciously believe that if we are worrying, then we are *doing something*, and this will somehow help the situation. The only thing that might be helpful in this case, however, is to take action to mitigate the concern.

For example, if you are concerned about a pain in your leg, you may decide to consult a doctor, which could be helpful in mitigating the concern. If, however, you choose to *worry* about the leg pain, your mind is likely to go into overdrive and seek to consider all possible causes and effects of the pain. This may then prompt you to look up all conditions that have leg pain as a symptom, and you may well end up diagnosing yourself with some dreadful affliction. What started out as just a dull pain in your leg could suddenly become a blood clot that is going to travel to your brain and cause a fatal aneurism! And of course, this dismal diagnosis will only lead to more worry and anxiety. As you can see, the more you "feed" worry, the more it builds.

The fact is that worry is just a bunch of negative thoughts, which have no power to make a situation better. As *The Bible* says, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? [Matthew 6:27]"



2. SET UP A “PLANNING PERIOD” TO MANAGE CONCERNS.

If you find that you have lots of “concerns” that randomly pop into your head throughout the day (as many people do), set up a planning period to manage the concerns. When concerns or worries arise, you have every right to decide that it is inconvenient, at that moment, to do the problem solving. Perhaps you are engaged in something that requires your immediate attention. In that case, make a decision to think about the concern at a later time, such as “a planning period” you set aside for yourself (but not before bed time). Write down the concern if you are afraid you will forget it, and then refocus your attention back to the present moment.

Otherwise, if you give your worried or fearful thoughts free reign of your mind, they can become like a large group of unsupervised, rambunctious children. Before you know it, they will escalate to a fever pitch and get out of control. To stick with the analogy of thoughts being like children, what would you do if you were on an important phone call, and your child was constantly trying to interrupt you? Although most would immediately discipline the distracting child, few take any action whatsoever to stop all the random, equally distracting, worrisome thoughts that enter into the mind.

Just as you may ask the interrupting child to wait until you are ready to deal with him, you can just as easily do the same thing with your concerns. You can simply write them down, and then use a designated “planning period” to do your problem solving.

