When Worrying Takes Over

There are many worries out there. The man who constantly worries about whether he has or will get cancer or another terrible disease. The woman who lies awake at night, fearing that she will never meet the right one. The grandmother who can’t let go of the idea that the plane with her grandchildren on board might crash. The employee who can’t concentrate because he fears he may have made a mistake that will cost him his job.

They are all different, but worriers also have a lot in common: Unconsciously, they see worrying as a useful strategy to get prepared and gain control. However, worries have a tendency to take over and invade our minds much of their waking hours. In vain, they try reducing it in various ineffective ways. The man runs to his doctors every week to take new tests. The woman desperately tries to battle her thoughts of being alone, keeping herself occupied or seeking confirmation from others that she will be loved. The grandmother keeps calling the airline, scours news websites for plane crashes and calls her grandchildren as soon as they land. The employee goes through all the work he has done in recent days even on weekends.

Most of us will understand that this does not work in the long term. You may have tried it yourself. It requires a lot of time and provides only temporary relief, before worry knocks at the door again. It can be hard on us and those around us. Few, however, have an understanding of why this is and what alternatives we have.

Supply and Demand of Thoughts

We try either to force or instruct ourselves to “stop thinking about it.” Have you tried this strategy? We can test how it works. Close your eyes and imagine a polar bear for 10 seconds. Easy, right? Now, for the next minute, try not to think of a polar bear. Every time you think of a polar bear, you need to squeeze your hand hard. Difficult? This task is nearly impossible for most people, because of a few simple reasons. The things we fear are like magnets for our attention. If you are afraid of dogs, you will notice them as soon as they are nearby. The thought of a polar bear is a threat in this experiment. However, what is more troublesome is the following: If you are trying not to think of a polar bear, you must also check if you’re thinking of a polar bear. And that way, you also need to think of a polar bear. It is an impossible rule to follow.

This is important for worriers to remember: The more we get annoyed by our thoughts or treat them as if they are important or dangerous, the more they come.

By this point, we need to make a distinction. There are two things that come into play when our minds run into chaos: The thought that triggers it, and how we relate to this thought. The triggered thought might be, “My body feels heavy.” How we relate to this thought might be to worry about it, an exhausting mental repetitive activity where we run through all the possible scenarios and implications it may have. “What if the heaviness is a sign of cancer? What if it’s not cancer? What if the heaviness is just normal?” The factor did not check for this the last time I went there. There may be other symptoms I have. I better Google it. I might die!

If our primary strategy when a scary thought comes is worrying or seeking confirmation, we treat the thought as if it is very important. That way, it becomes a polar bear and will come more often. It’s almost as if we think that thinking the thought increases the likelihood that it will happen or has already happened. In a way, our brains operate through basic market principles: supply and demand. If we always buy every thought we have, the offer becomes larger. We try frantically to think it through, in order to stop worrying, when we are really just reinforcing the pattern.

Try Problem Solving Instead

This is typical because at a certain level, many of us see worrying as a useful strategy. We get prepared. We find solutions. We perform better. We get an overview. But do we really? Yet another distinction: Worrying is not the same as problem solving. Worrying is the mental activity in which we envisage future negative events and act on them. Problem solving is taking steps to reduce the likelihood of something happening or solving an actual problem.

Worrying is constant fear of getting cancer. Problem solving is to have a healthy and good diet and keeping active to reduce the likelihood of getting cancer. Which one is the most effective way of reducing the risk of cancer? Thoughts or action? Similarly, checking flight times, the weather forecast or news sites for plane crashes does not reduce the likelihood of an airplane engine malfunction.

But don’t you perform better if you feel stress? That’s true! For instance, you can motivate us to do something about it (i.e. problem solving). It may also make us perform better when we’re doing something demanding. But worrying tends to happen in days, months or even years before what we fear actually occurs — or maybe it never happens at all. If we really think about it, we know that worrying takes a toll on our sleep and energy. We know also that our fears tend to be much more extensive and devastating than things usually plays out. Worries might be crippling, exhausting and strikingly inaccurate. Does that really make us more prepared?

It may seem obvious or even arrogant, but basically worrying is quite useless in itself. If you do not have a problem, there is no need to worry. Let’s say you have a problem. If there is anything you can do to solve it, you need not worry. You could practice problem solving. If there is nothing you can do about the problem, worrying is no solution.

Recognize Negative Thoughts

The challenge for worriers is to first recognize how worrying may be and wear us down. It doesn’t do us any lasting physical or mental harm, but it is very stressful and exhausting. Furthermore, we must enhance the experience of control by trying new strategies to reduce our anxiety. We have to practice on recognizing negative thoughts but actively choose not to delve into them, or use problem solving instead.

How can we treat thoughts without worrying? You can try the following exercise. Introduce a “worry break” for half an hour every night. This is not a break from worrying, but a break for worrying. The rest of the day you can postpone all your worries until this break. Tell yourself: “There goes a negative thought about [ ]. The fact that the thought is here is okay, but I do not need to worry about it right now. I can postpone my worry later. I’ll handle it in the worry break, but let the thought itself be there now if it wants to.”

Do not let it become a polar bear by getting annoyed or scared. Thoughts are just thoughts. When you get to the worry break, check if you still need to worry. If you still feel like it, then do it. You can do a lot of efficient worrying or problem solving for half an hour. Afterwards, you postpone “the left-overs” to the break the next day. If you are not worried anymore, you can just skip the break.

This is just one of many techniques to reduce worrying. You can meditate. Or practice creating distance to thoughts in order to let them be. Divert your attention in a friendly manner. Reduce checking and seeking confirmation. The possibilities are many and there is good help. It all starts, however, with the recognition that the thoughts themselves are not threatening or “wrong.” It is how we treat those thoughts which is the problem.

—By Aksel Inge Sinding http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2016/12/20/when-worrying-takes-over/

7 Red Flags to Watch Out for in a New Relationship

You’re dating someone new and everything seems to be going pretty well. That is until you spot something a little off in his (or her) behavior. When you’re first getting to know someone, you don’t want to analyze and judge every single thing he does or way he acts, but you also want to evaluate what kind of person he is and if he could be a good fit for you.

When we really like someone, we often want to overlook certain behaviors and brush it off to him or her having a bad day or our reading the situation wrong. But before you get too invested in someone, it’s important to know what her personality is really like. Here are seven red flags to watch out for in a new relationship.

1. Your friends don’t like him

True friends have your best interest in mind. If they don’t like the new guy you’re dating, they probably see something in him that you don’t. Sometimes the excitement of a new relationship blinds us to someone’s true qualities. If you’re not getting a good report from your friends, step back and take a closer look at your beau to try to better see what they see.

2. She talks about herself a lot

People who constantly talk about themselves are usually self-absorbed and a bit narcissistic. If she doesn’t ask you questions about your day, your family, etc., then she likely doesn’t truly care.
3. You find him checking out other women

Your guy should be into you. If you find him scanning the restaurant or club, looking at other women, then he might be looking for his next fling. It’s disrespectful to check out other women, especially when he is on a date with you. If he respects you, he won’t be doing this.

4. She talks down to you or others

No one wants to feel belittled or talked down to. If your new romantic interest criticizes you, diminishes your feelings, or insults you in any way, then she isn’t a good catch. The same thing goes with how she treats others. If she treats you like a god, but you see her discounting others, the time will likely come when she discounts you, too.

5. Small things set him off

Some men tend to have temperaments when they become angry and this isn’t always a cause for concern. But if little things make him furious, or minor details cause him to erupt, then he could have anger issues. If little things make him mad, how will he react when larger problems come your way?

6. She is controlling

Whether she tells you to stop hanging out with your guy friends or she always dictates when and where the dates will be, she has to have the final say in your life. Sometimes this can come out in small ways, such as her asking, “Oh, you’re wearing that?” Stay with this girl and she will eventually want to control every aspect of your life. It is probably wise to get far away from this one.

7. You’ve experienced any sort of violence

If he has grabbed you forcefully even once, get out. Violent men are dangerous and need professional help. A common mistake is to think that if you can convince yourself you will be the one to help him. Violence is never acceptable. Run the other way if he is acting aggressive toward you or anyone else.

New relationships should be drama-free for the most part. Early on, it’s all about the excitement of getting to know each other, first kisses, and having fun together. If you just started dating someone and are questioning his or her maturity, character, or sincerity, trust your gut, value yourself, and consider if the relationship is really worth continuing.

~ By Kurt Smith, Psy.D., LMFT, LPCC, AFC

https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2016/12/10/4-ways-to-face-your-fears-and-overcome-phobias/