

An Ounce of Prevention

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When Worrying Takes Over

There are many worriers 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 their 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 one more time.

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 at all. 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 triggering 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? It might be an undiagnosed testicular cancer. The doctor 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 over and over. 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, stress can motivate us to practice more or 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 tear 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. Try to think the following: "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 worrying for 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. 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 chock it up 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. Staying in a one-sided relationship with someone who is

completely self-centered isn't healthy and will ultimately leave you unfulfilled.

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 tempers 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 men and need professional help. A common mistake is to stay and tell 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/2017/01/20/7-red-flags-to-watch-out-for-in-a-new-relationship/>

4 Ways to Face Your Fears and Overcome Phobias

We all have them — fears, phobias, anxieties that shorten our breath, quicken our heartbeats, and sometimes can outright disable us. Some of us shut our eyes and hold our breath as we ride the elevator to the tenth floor of an office building, while others pray the Rosary inside that coffin-like enclosure when getting an MRI.

I am afraid of heights — in particularly driving over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. It doesn't look all that menacing, but the structure spans over 4.3 miles and reaches to 200 feet high in places. I'm obviously not alone with my jitters, because two years ago Inside Edition did a story on it, calling it quite possibly the scariest bridge in the world. It was also on Travel + Leisure's list of the 10 scariest bridges in the world — the only other two American bridges being the Mackinac Straights Bridge in Michigan and the Royal Gorge Bridge in Colorado.

The Bay Bridge connects Maryland's eastern and western shores (Annapolis is on the western shore), so kids' sporting events on the eastern shore present a real problem for a mom with gephyrophobia (a fear of crossing bridges — yes, there is a word for us!). Usually I would make my husband take off work to drive either Katherine or David across the bridge. But the other night he was out of town, so I was forced to face my fear, which is usually the way phobias are addressed.

I followed these four steps as my strategy, which I thought might help you because I realized (once I was on the other side) that they actually apply to everything we don't want to do and to living with depression, in general.

1. Focus on the Yellow Lines (Or What's Right in Front of You)

This is true of so many things — if we can keep our view on just what is in front of us, instead of the really high span a mile ahead, we have a better shot of staying calm. Ironically, when I swam UNDER the bridge — during which people freak out, as well, because at places you are swimming in 174-foot deep water — someone told me to count the concrete constructions along the way, to never try to gauge how much distance to the other side. It was sage advice. Whenever I looked up and tried to figure out how much water to the shore, my breath became more labored and swimming became much more difficult. But if I could concentrate on counting my strokes and the constructions along the way, I

made better time toward the shore, and I forgot that I was a mile away from land on each side.

When driving over the bridge, I did much better when I kept my gaze down at the yellow lines. This is also true if you are in the midst of a depressive episode. I always tell people to take it 15 minutes at a time, no more.

2. Take Some Cheerleaders

"Mom, this is not that big of a deal," my son reminded me as we paid the \$4 toll to get across the bridge. Conquering your fear is much easier when you have some cheerleaders to accompany you. This is true when you challenge yourself in any regard, from running a 5K to giving a talk at an event. I remember the time when a friend of mine couldn't get into an elevator of skyscraper in New York City until my sister offered to ride up with her.

Of course, the cheerleaders can also distract you, which is a plus, like on the way back when my kids were fighting over a Chick-Fil-A milkshake, grabbing it out of each other's hands just as we reached the highest part of the bridge. My attention turned from the little yellow lines to screaming, "Stop it already! Can't you see Mom's not having fun?!"

3. Watch Your Breath

In addition to counting the yellow lines, I practiced a modified Pranayama, the first breathing exercise of Bikram yoga. Obviously my hands were on the steering wheel and I couldn't throw my head back, but I inhaled to a count of six breathing in through my nose and then exhaled to a count of six breathing throughout my mouth.

When you breathe deeply, you stimulate your vagus nerve, a long nerve that extends from our medulla oblongata, located in the brain stem, to the stomach and links our two nervous systems (the central nervous system and the peripheral nervous system). It is often considered a bridge between between our conscious minds ("I am driving across a really high bridge") and subconscious minds ("I'll never be able to overcome my fears"). By stimulating the vagus nerve and the parasympathetic nervous system, we release anti-stress enzymes and hormones such as acetylcholine, prolactin, vasopressin, and oxytocin.

The first thing that happens when we panic is that our breath grows shallow and the loss of oxygen sends an alarm throughout our body that we are in harm's way, which further paralyzes our thoughts and our biological systems. Stopping this reaction as it is happening is much more difficult than keeping it from happening to begin with, so it's best to slow your breath from the beginning and make sure you keep it at a deliberate, measured pace until you're on dry land or out of the elevator.

4. Apply Some Humor

I was very glad that a friend asked me to watch Bob Newhart's video "Stop It" last week before I attempted the bridge drive. I apologize in advance if anyone finds the video offensive, but for those of us who have endured some really bad therapy sessions and have fears that make absolutely no sense, it is a welcome comic relief. The woman who comes in for therapy is afraid she is going to be buried in a box alive, and Bob simply says, "STOP IT!" She goes on to say she has bad relationships with men, is bulimic (I realize this is sensitive, but I also had an eating disorder and I appreciated the humor), and a list of other things, and all he says is "STOP IT!"

At the highest point of the bridge, I did begin to panic a little and feared that I was going to have a bona fide panic attack. "What if I can no longer control my foot and I accidentally hit the accelerator, smashing us into this truck in front of us, and we go over the side," I thought to myself. "Maybe I should open all the windows now so that the kids and I can climb out because the weight of the water will make it impossible for me to punch through the glass ..." The ruminations were just beginning when I said to myself, "STOP IT!" and laughed, remembering the video. "This is insane. Just STOP IT!" ~ *by Therese J. Borchard, Associate Editor*

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

Net News***

Podcast:

A Family Doctor and Trauma Therapist on How Trauma Increases Risk for Disease

<https://chronicillnesstraumastudies.com/podcast-trauma-chronic-illness-not-in-your-head/>

Website:

Psychotherapy leads in treating post-traumatic stress disorder

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/psychotherapy-leads-in-treating-post-traumatic-stress-disorder-2019091217611>

Self- Help Corner:

Kids Help Line: 1-800-668-6868

Support Centre - 211