



WORRY

What is Worry?

Worry is a form of thinking that can be stressful if taken to extremes. Key features of worry are that it is repetitive and non-productive. When we are worrying, we are thinking about something over and over again but do not resolve the situation or arrive at a solution to the problem. When we continually think about the exam that will be given next week and imagine many distressing outcomes yet do not study or do something to release the tension, we are worrying. When a close friend or family member is late and we begin to imagine all variety of accidents that may have befallen them, we are worrying. Frequently, there is nothing that can be done, but we worry anyway.

The Good and the Bad

At times, worry can be beneficial such as when it encourages us to take action to change a situation. If we are really worried about an upcoming test, and determine that it means we have to study more or talk with the professor, then worry has been useful. When worry helps us plan for an upcoming event by imagining the various scenarios that might come about, it can be helpful. Worry becomes a problem, however, when it leads to continual anxiety and fear or when it consists of continually repeating the same thinking pattern over and over. Worry can also have negative effects on both your body and your mind. It may cause physical problems such as an upset stomach, headaches, and muscle tension. It may be more difficult to concentrate or focus on other things while you are worrying.

How Much is Too Much?

Are you a mellow person who never seems to worry about things you cannot control? Or are you seen as a worrywart, always thinking about what might happen? How much distress does this create in your daily life? How much people worry and the problems it causes for people is on a continuum. Craske, Barlow and O'Leary recommend asking yourself the following questions to determine if you are worrying too much:

- ◆ Do you worry about things that you recognize most people do not worry about (such as little things around your home)?
- ◆ Do you find it very difficult to stop worrying, and cannot relax as a result?
- ◆ Does your worry rarely result in your reaching a possible solution for a particular problem?
- ◆ Do you believe that if you do not worry a terrible event will actually happen?
- ◆ Do you worry about not being worried, or worry when everything is going well in your life?

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

If your worry is interfering with your daily life and you experience a high level of physical tension, you may fit the criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). GAD is characterized by 6 months or more of chronic, exaggerated worry and tension that is unfounded or much more severe than the normal anxiety most people experience. People with this disorder usually expect the worst; they worry excessively about money, health, family, or work, even when there are no signs of trouble. People with GAD can't seem to shake their concerns, even though they usually realize that their anxiety is more intense than the situation warrants. People with GAD also seem unable to relax and often have trouble falling or staying asleep. Their worries are accompanied by physical symptoms, especially trembling, twitching, muscle tension, headaches, irritability, sweating, or hot flashes. GAD comes on gradually and most often hits people in childhood or adolescence, but can begin in adulthood, too. It's more common in women than

in men and often occurs in relatives of affected persons. Some research suggests that GAD may grow worse during stress. (*The above information about GAD was condensed from a public domain brochure produced by the National Institute of Mental Health. For the full text of the brochure, visit the NIMH website at www.nimh.nih.gov.*)

What Should I Do?

Self-Help

There are many techniques that can help you control your worry.

- ◆ Shift your focus of attention away from your worry. Practice "Thought Stopping" telling yourself to STOP your current thought and shift your focus to another more pleasing thought (a day at the beach.)
- ◆ Learn physical and mental relaxation through techniques such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, imagery or meditation.
- ◆ Write down your worries. Sometimes, the act of writing worries down allows you to let go of the circular worry process.
- ◆ Schedule a time for worrying. When a worry comes to mind, tell yourself you will worry about it at a specific time (say 6 PM) and shift your focus to something else. At 6 PM, make sure you take fifteen or twenty minutes to examine your worries from the day.
- ◆ Review the books listed below for more information and additional techniques.

If your self-help efforts are not effective or your worry is distressing you or making it difficult to enjoy life and accomplish your goals, seek professional help.

Professional Help

Various types of counseling and psychotherapy have been shown effective in helping with excessive worry. Particular techniques include cognitive-behavioral therapy, relaxation techniques, and biofeedback. Some medications have also been useful in the treatment of Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Consultation with a mental health professional (psychologist, psychiatrist, counselor, social worker) will help you determine the best treatment for you.

BOOKS: Available for browsing in the UI Counseling & Testing Center Self-Help Room

The Worry Control Workbook. By Mary Ellen Copeland, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 1998.

This workbook describes many techniques for coping with worry based on the author's personal experience and her interviews with individuals who struggle with worry. The book is interspersed with quotations from her study participants that guide the reader in understanding and working with their own worry. She focuses initially on analyzing your own personal worry patterns and styles, and describing techniques for dealing with worry such as focusing, journaling, taking action, and problem solving. The second part of the book addresses specific worries and suggests self-help techniques for each topic.

Worry: Controlling it and Using it Wisely. By Edward M. Hallowell, New York: Ballantine Books, 1998.

Part I of this book provides a general overview of worry including a discussion of the positive outcomes of worry, the biological basis of worry, and a self-assessment quiz to determine how much of a worrier you are. Part II examines many different types of worry including worry in relationships, at work, and worry associated with depression. The relationship between worry and other anxiety disorders such as Panic, OCD and Generalized Anxiety Disorder is discussed. Part III lists a variety of techniques to control worry including taking action, changing thoughts, exercise, and letting go.

Need Additional Help?

The University of Idaho Counseling & Testing Center offers free group and individual counseling/psychotherapy for these and related issues for full time UI students. For more information or to schedule an appointment, call the Counseling & Testing Center (Mary E. Forney Hall, Rm. 306, 1210 Blake Ave.) at 208-885-6716. All appointments are strictly confidential.