



# NO NEED TO WORRY

Worrying is a good and useful tool – up to a point. It helps keep us safe and reminds us to get things done. But when it spirals out of control, it turns into an energy-sapping, sleep-stealing anxiety cycle. What, asks Victoria Read, are we so worried about?

**W**orry has become a modern-day epidemic, infecting our lives with different strains – from sweating the small stuff (did I lock the car?) to imagining the worst (is this headache a brain tumour?).

And it's a habit we are teaching our children: research shows that today, levels of anxiety in high school students in the US are as high as those of psychiatric patients in the 1950s, while the UK's Mental Health Foundation estimates that 10 per cent of us are likely to have a disabling anxiety disorder at some point. Meanwhile, research shows that women are more likely than men to brood on their worries.

'I put unnecessary pressure on myself by worrying,' admits Karen, 35, a scriptwriter from London. 'I worry that my work isn't good enough and I worry about the small things, such as the friend I haven't emailed. Instead of taking action, which might curb the worry, I feel paralysed by my anxiety.'

So, if we know it doesn't serve us, why do we worry? 'Worry is a normal thought process – a survival instinct,' explains Adrian Wells, professor of clinical and experimental psychopathology at the University of Manchester. 'But it becomes abnormal when it is excessive and interferes with meeting important personal goals. I have known people who refuse promotion, or stay in unhappy relationships because they were too worried about what might happen if they changed the situation.'

Robert Leahy, president of the International Association of Cognitive Psychotherapy, believes that many of us worry in the mistaken belief that it helps us to prevent our worst fears from happening, or to motivate

ourselves to act responsibly. 'People think worry is helpful,' he says. 'They think "I need to worry to be protected" – they look at it as a way of avoiding a problem.' Yet worry is rarely helpful, and is often counter-productive.

Leahy distinguishes between productive worry – the concerns that prompt us to act – and unproductive 'what-if' worry, when we imagine worst-case scenarios. 'What-if' worrying often occurs because we overthink situations and feel a need to control the uncontrollable. The key is to isolate what we can control and to rigorously question just how plausible are our other concerns. Challenging irrational worries in this way exposes just how unfounded they are.

If we don't do this, our worries can, over time, suppress the immune system, raise blood pressure and lead to anxiety-related conditions such as generalised anxiety disorder (GAD). We also run the risk of stunting our emotional intelligence. Research by Joseph LeDoux, professor at the Center for Neural Science at New York University, shows that worry suppresses the amygdala (the area of the brain that provides a fast, emotional reaction to threatening stimuli and teaches the brain to mediate a better response next time). Instead, abstract, unemotional brain areas, such as the frontal cortex, are activated, delaying our ability to process and learn from our emotions.

But LeDoux also insists it is possible to 'rewire' the brain. Quite simply, you can cure yourself of worry – with transformational results. 'People who take control of their worries are freed up to enjoy an active life. They avoid fewer situations and, as a result, have a richer life with more experiences,' says Wells. Read on for advice from the experts on how to stop worrying and start living.

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## 1 THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A BORN WORRIER

'I worry about everything. I always have,' says Eileen, 42, a healthcare manager from Nottingham. But is there such a thing as a 'born worrier'? According to personal construct psychology, worry is a behaviour, not a personality trait. 'What determines our behaviour is not what happens to us but how we interpret it,' explains Dorothy Rowe, psychologist and author of *Beyond Fear* (£12.99, HarperCollins). So by believing you are a born worrier, you will be more likely to interpret your experiences from that perspective. Research by Joseph LeDoux, professor at the Center for Neural Science at New York University, also suggests it is 'nurture' rather than 'nature' that creates worriers – he found that unconscious, fear-related memories from the past imprint on the brain. Eileen admits that this could be true for her. 'My mother was very ill a lot of the time when I was growing up, so there was always something to worry about. I suppose that my fearful, worried way of thinking became a habit.' Using worry profiles or tests to learn more about your attitudes towards worry can be a first step to breaking the worry habit (see the panel on page 68).

## 2 CHALLENGE YOUR NEGATIVE BELIEFS

Robert Leahy, president of the International Association of Cognitive Psychotherapy, believes we each have a core belief about ourselves, formed in childhood, that determines what we worry about. If your core belief is that you are sloppy, your worries will centre around your work not being of a high enough standard. If you believe you are boring, you will focus on what others think of you. Try noting down your most common worries. For example, if they are things such as 'I'm sure my boss thinks I'm less efficient than my colleagues' or 'I'll never finish that evening course', then your core belief may be that you are lazy. Once you've identified your core belief, the next step is to challenge it. For example, look back over the past week and ask: 'how much time did I actually spend being lazy?' Next, act against that belief: 'Is it possible to be lazy a little bit of the time without being a slob?' Finally, develop a more positive belief: 'I have the right to relax once in a while.'

## 3 LEARN TO ACCEPT UNCERTAINTY

Are you seeking a perfect solution to your problems, and using worry as a strategy to achieve this? Annemarie, a 41-year-old accountant, admits that she does. 'If I'm worried about a meeting, I think about it constantly, trying to work out what will happen, trying to find a perfect scenario – I want to have all the answers,' she says. 'A core

feature of worriers is an intolerance of uncertainty,' explains Leahy, who has found that most worriers would prefer to know a negative outcome for sure than to handle an uncertain outcome that could be positive. 'They reject solutions that are imperfect about something that hasn't even happened. But you have to be willing to do things that are imperfect, in order to be successful.' He suggests listing all the things you worry may happen in the next

week. A week later, write down what actually happened and how you felt afterwards. A 2002 study\* found that, on average, 85 per cent of the negative predictions that worriers make do not come true. Alternatively, try what Leahy calls 'thought flooding'. This requires you to repeat your worrying thought for several minutes every day, without seeking a solution. The repetition eventually enables you to realise that you can handle uncertainty.

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\*WORRY BEARS: FROM A SELECTION OF THE GREEK (WILEY, 200, 994). HAND MODEL: CLARE UNDERWOOD AT NOT MODELS. BARKOCCO, NEWMAN, FINCUS AND TITTE IN THE JOURNAL OF CONSULTING AND CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY, VOLUME 70, ISSUE 2 (2002)

## 4 RECOGNISE THAT YOU CAN COPE

'In life we actually have very little control over what happens. Unexpected things happen all the time,' says Dorothy Rowe. Every day, millions of people become bankrupt, lose their home, their health or someone they love, and live to tell the tale. Rather than viewing 'worst-case scenarios' as total disaster, you should

consider the possible benefits, advises Leahy. Vivienne, 34, an architect from Leeds, lost her mother in her twenties. 'I used to think, "how am I ever going to get married or have kids? How will I know what to do?" Now I've done both – and though I miss my mum, I never had to put up with the kind of interference friends of mine get from their mums over wedding plans or having kids. I do it my way.'

## 5 CHANGE YOUR BEDTIME HABITS

Pre-sleep worriers have a deep-seated belief that it is helpful to dwell on worries at night, and necessary to stay organised, according to clinical psychologist Allison Harvey at the University of California. If you are stressed and busy, your levels of the stress hormone cortisol remain high when you go to bed, stimulating the frontal cortex area of the brain. Without the activities of the day to occupy it, it starts to race, like the momentum that throws passengers forward when a car suddenly stops. Instead, you need to activate areas of the brain linked to falling asleep, those associated with memory and visual content. Harvey's research showed that conjuring up a tranquil scene, such as being on holiday or the details of a house you grew up in, helped night worriers drop off. Paint a picture in your head – but keep it interesting and detailed. Try to imagine specific aspects of your chosen scene, such as colours, sounds and even smells. Counting boring old sheep won't work.

## 6 BANISH YOUR NIGHT-TIME WORRIES

'The darkest hour really is before the dawn,' says chartered psychologist Alice Muir. 'If you wake early morning, or in the night, your mind is depressed due to increased levels of melatonin – the hormone which triggers both sleep and low mood.' On waking, sleep inertia, a temporary impairment in concentration, means we are initially 50 per cent less able to make good decisions and still 20 per cent less able half an hour after waking. Yet we often spend this time going over our worries, which seem to loom larger at night. Trying to 'stop worrying' can lengthen the time it takes to nod off. Instead, keep a list next to your bed and write your worries down. This should help you to calm down enough to sleep. The next day, when you are alert, look at what you can do about each one. If you wake and can't put your finger on why – don't try. Rowe says that humans often have a subconscious fear that sleep equals death. 'We cover up this "nameless dread" by attaching the dread to a worry.'

## RESOURCES

- **THE WORRY CURE** by Robert Leahy (£10.99, Piatkus)
- **COPING WITH A STRESSED NERVOUS SYSTEM: AUTONOMIC OVERLOAD EXPLAINED** by Kenneth Hambly and Alice Muir (£7.99, Sheldon Press)
- **COGNITIVE THERAPY OF ANXIETY DISORDERS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE** by Adrian Wells (£29.99, Wiley)
- **EMOTIONAL DISORDERS AND METACOGNITION: INNOVATIVE COGNITIVE THERAPY** by Adrian Wells (£60, Wiley)

## 7 NAME YOUR FEAR

Many people feel they can't tolerate the fact that something is worrying them, and cope by pretending their feelings don't exist rather than expressing them. Leahy calls this 'repressive coping' – when you find it hard to even identify how you feel about something, and may feel a need to remain rational. A much healthier approach is 'expressive coping'. Say how you feel, let yourself cry or be upset. In a study by the psychologist James Pennebaker, students wrote about an experience that had upset them. Immediately afterwards, they felt worse. But, a few weeks later, the students actually felt better than another group who hadn't been asked to write down their feelings. Leahy recommends keeping an emotion diary for a few weeks, in which you note down what is worrying you and why. Initially you may feel worse, but over time you will feel better for it, and will be able to put your worries into better perspective. A related trick is to set aside 30 minutes daily to list everything worrying you. At first, this may make your worries seem more overwhelming. But Leahy has found that if patients do this every day for about two weeks, they realise that their worries are in fact quite repetitive and limited. The same issues come up over and over again, and your worries may end up seeming boring rather than threatening.

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