

THE WORRY CURE

Seven Steps to Stop Worry
from Stopping You

Robert L. Leahy, Ph.D.



PRAISE FOR *THE WORRY CURE*

Selected as one of the top eight self-help books of all time in *Self* magazine

“I heartily recommend this book to everybody who is worried ... and that includes practical all of us. Eminent psychologist Dr. Robert L. Leahy has designed an easy-to-follow program pinpointing unproductive worries across the broad spectrum of relationships, work, health and finances. In elegant style, he shows how to neutralize and even eliminate them.”

—**Aaron T. Beck, M.D.**, president of the Beck Institute for Cognitive Therapy and Research and university professor emeritus of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania

“Highly instructive and accessible ... Worriers will find relief here.”

—**Janis Abrahms Spring, Ph.D.**, author of *After the Affair* and *How Can I Forgive You?*

“An excellent book. The self-assessment questionnaires narrow down each reader’s personal domains of worry, giving them a leg up on making life-altering changes, and the easy-to-understand step-by-step procedures for overcoming worry provide useful tools that are research-based.”

—**Monica Ramirez Basco, Ph.D.**, author of *New Good Enough* and coauthor of *Getting Your Life Back*

“Clear and easy to follow ... like having Dr. Leahy, one of the foremost psychologists in the world, as your personal therapist. His superb insights and understanding of worry allow him to reasonably and logically address this often unreasonable and illogical problem.”

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“Compelling, informative, and highly accessible. This book is certain to become the standard in assisting those who worry achieve fuller, healthier lives.”

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“A must-read ... During a time when society is under more stress than ever comes this comprehensive book written by one of the world’s most noted authorities. Packed with clinical advice in a practical style, it addresses everyone from the occasional worrywart to some of the most severe types of ruminators.”

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ROBERT L. LEAHY, Ph.D.


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INTRODUCTION

The Seven Rules of Highly Worried People

WORRYING IS SECOND NATURE to you, but imagine that someone who has been raised in the jungle and knows nothing about conventional modern life approached you and asked, “How do I get started about learning how to worry?” Of course, you’ve been worrying spontaneously for years, but how would you teach someone to worry? How would you come up with a rule book for how to worry?

First, you’d have to come up with some good reasons why you *need* to worry. What could the reasons be? How about “Worry motivates me” or “Worry helps me solve my problems” or “Worry keeps me from being surprised”? Those sound like excellent reasons to worry.

Then you can come up with some ideas about when to start worrying. What is going to trigger this experience for you? You might say, “When something bad happens,” but that’s not really the case, because you worry about bad things that haven’t happened *yet*. Or you might say, “When something bad is *about* to happen.” But how would you know if it’s *about* to happen? It hasn’t happened yet, and almost everything that you worry about happening never has happened. You could say, “Worry about things that you can *imagine* happening that are really bad.” You can now imagine a million bad things that never *have to happen*. It’s an unlimited supply of worries.

Now that you have some potential material to work with, you will have to focus on your worries. There are so many other things to distract you: work, friends, family, hobbies, achievements, and pains, even sleep. How will you keep your mind on your worries?

That’s easy. Tell yourself some stories about all the bad things that could happen. Embellish them with details. Start each sentence, where possible, with “what if” and then come up with every possible horrible outcome. Keep telling yourself these bad stories, each time trying to figure out if you left out something important. You can’t trust your memory. Come up with all of the possibilities—and then *dwell on them*. Remember, if it’s possible, it’s probable.

And don’t forget, keep thinking that *if something bad could happen—if you can simply imagine it—then it’s your responsibility to worry about it*. That’s the first rule of worry.

But if something bad could happen, what does it have to do with you? Well, the second rule is, *don’t accept any uncertainty—you need to know for sure*.

So solve every problem that you can think of right now. You’ll feel better. You’ll finally be able to relax once you’ve eliminated uncertainty from your life. If you had absolute certainty, you wouldn’t be worried, would you? You have to go out and get that perfection, that certainty.

Now, let’s start with your health. You can’t be completely *certain* that this discoloration isn’t cancer. You just saw the doctor—but haven’t doctors been wrong before? Moving along

you can't be sure that all of your money won't run out. Or that you won't lose your job. you did lose your job, you can't be absolutely, 100 percent sure that you would get another job. Or that people who respect you now won't lose all of their respect if you don't keep things going at the highest level possible.

Let's face it—is there anything that you are really certain of?

Maybe you can get some certainty by getting other people to reassure you. Maybe someone else is a better judge than you are. Go to the doctor as many times as you can afford to and ask her if she can tell you *absolutely for sure* that there is nothing wrong with you, or if she can tell you that you will never get sick and die. Ask your friends if they think you still look as good as you did last year. Maybe you can catch things before they slide too far. Maybe before you completely fall apart—get sick and lose your money, job, friends, and your look—you can catch it all and reverse it in a heroic effort of self-help. Maybe it's not too late. That's the great thing about demanding certainty. You will eliminate any oversights. You won't be naive. You won't be caught by surprise.

But simply being motivated and not accepting uncertainty is not enough to be a worrier. You need evidence that things can go badly. So the third rule is, *treat all of your negative thoughts as if they are really true.*

If you think someone doesn't like you, it's probably true. If you think you'll get fired, count on it. If you think that someone else is upset, then it's all about you. The more you treat your thoughts as if they are reality, the more you will be able to worry.

But why should you care what people think about you or how you do on your job? Why should it matter to you?

The fourth rule solves this problem: *anything bad that could happen is a reflection of who you are as a person.*

If you don't do well on the exam, you are incompetent. If someone doesn't like you, you must be a loser. If your partner is angry, it must mean you'll end up alone and miserable. It's all about who you *really* are.

But some things are just not a big deal. Why should a loss or a failure be so important? Why worry if it's a small loss or a small failure?

Because the fifth rule of highly worried people is: *failure is unacceptable.*

You can think of everything as your responsibility, and if you fail, you think about how everyone will know and how this is entirely the final test of who you are. You can make your worries as powerful as possible by thinking, "I can never handle any failure."

Now your worries are really important.

You know they are really important because you feel how powerfully they affect you: knots in your stomach, rapid heart rate, whirring in your ears, headaches, cold sweat, sleepless nights. Now that you notice you have all of these feelings, you need to get rid of them right away. And that's rule six: *get rid of any negative feelings immediately.*

But wait. You can't get rid of them? They're not going away? That's a bad sign. You should be able to get rid of bad feelings *right now*. Who knows what they'll turn into if left to fester? Maybe the fact that you can't get rid of those bad feelings means something really awful is going to happen. Maybe there are terrible things you haven't thought of. Maybe you're losing control. And that's unacceptable. That's something that needs to be addressed as soon as possible. Therefore, the seventh rule is, *treat everything like an emergency.*

Don't kid yourself by thinking you can wait to get around to handling these things. Everything has to be solved *right now*—all of your problems, all of your worries, everything. You can lie in bed and go over every single problem that you will face tomorrow or next year and say to yourself, "I need the answers *immediately*."

So far, we are imagining bad stories and treating them like facts to motivate you to be responsible and worry. You're not going to accept any uncertainty; you'll put yourself in the center of every situation and see yourself as a failure. You realize that your emotions have to be completely controlled, and so you will treat everything like an emergency to get rid of any bad thoughts or feelings.

Now you can go back to the guy who came out of the jungle and tell him that you have the Seven Rules of Highly Worried People. Let's take a close look at them and make sure we have everything:

1. If something bad could happen—if you can simply imagine it—then it's your responsibility to worry about it.
2. Don't accept any uncertainty—you need to know for sure.
3. Treat all of your negative thoughts as if they are really true.
4. Anything bad that could happen is a reflection of who you are as a person.
5. Failure is unacceptable.
6. Get rid of any negative feelings immediately.
7. Treat everything like an emergency.

But wait. Didn't you leave out something? Isn't there something you overlooked? Can you really trust your memory? You forgot the most important thing. You forgot to *worry about worrying*. You forgot to tell him, "All of this worrying is going to drive you crazy, give you a heart attack, and ruin your life completely." How could you forget the eighth rule—the rule that says, "Now that you're worried, you've got to stop worrying completely or you'll go crazy and die"?

But maybe you didn't worry enough about the assignment. Isn't that why you worry anyway? To be prepared? So you won't overlook anything? If you had worried about getting the assignment right, you would have seen that teaching your new friend to worry would ultimately drive him mad—or kill him.

Well, you're probably saying to yourself, "Very funny. It sounds just like me. But what does this have to do with helping me get rid of my worries?"

It's really quite simple. You worry because you follow a rule book that you think will actually help you. You think that you will catch things before they get out of hand, get rid of any unpleasant emotion immediately, and solve all your problems. You think that following these rules will make you feel more secure. But so far it hasn't worked.

In fact, your solutions are the problem. Your rule book makes you worry.

There Is Good News

For the past twenty years I have helped people suffering from depression and anxiety through

cognitive therapy. Cognitive therapy addresses the *biases in your thinking* (cognitions are your thoughts) that are causing your anxiety and depression. Anxiety disorders are really *problems in the way you think*. The relevance of cognitive therapy is that it helps you understand and modify these biases to effectively diminish your anxiety.

For many years chronic worriers had to suffer without any significant hope of getting better. Occasionally they would seek out help with antianxiety medications or antidepressants, which can help reduce some of the unpleasantness. Traditional forms of psychotherapy might be helpful in about 20 percent of cases, but the other 80 percent would not improve. Fortunately, though, we now have very good news for people who are chronic worriers.

There have been significant advances in the last ten years in new approaches that expand far beyond what cognitive therapists used to do. For example, we now know:

- People are actually *less* anxious when they are worrying.
- Intolerance of uncertainty is the most important element in worry.
- Worriers fear emotions and do not process the meaning of events because they are “too much in their heads.”

Worry is not simply pessimism; it’s a reflection of many different parts of who you are. Once you understand why you worry and why your worry makes sense to you, you can begin to explore some things that you can do—or not do—to help yourself.

- We now have a much greater understanding of how worry works.
- We can use this new understanding to reverse these troublesome worries.
- Three-quarters of people with this problem can be significantly helped with newer forms of therapy.

Based on the new research, I’ve developed a seven-step program to help you understand your own “theory” about worry, how your mind works, how your personality affects your worry, and the most effective techniques for defeating your worry and breaking those rules once and for all:

1. Identify productive and unproductive worry.
2. Accept reality and commit to change.
3. Challenge your worried thinking.
4. Focus on the deeper threat.
5. Turn “failure” into opportunity.
6. Use your emotions rather than worry about them.
7. Take control of time.

Let’s briefly examine each step.

1. *Identify productive and unproductive worry.* Most worriers are of two minds: “My worry

driving me crazy” and “I need to worry to be prepared.” Thus, you may be worried about giving up your worry, since you think it prepares and protects you. You will learn that you have mixed feelings about giving up on your worry, which is why you persist even when it makes you miserable. *Your worry is a strategy that you think helps you.* Until you give up that belief, you will continue to worry. You will learn how to get the motivation you need to stop and challenge your worries rather than think of your worries as a sign of how responsible and conscientious you are. Without the motivation to change your worry, all the advice in this world will be useless.

You will learn how to use *productive worry* by identifying problems that you can address immediately, such as getting a road map for your trip from New York to Boston. Unproductive worry involves imaginary what-ifs, such as “What if I get there and no one wants to talk with me?” Once you make this distinction you will learn how to use effective problem-solving strategies for real problems.

2. *Accept reality and commit to change.* You are unwilling to accept certain realities and possibilities that you might not like. Your worry is like a *protest against reality*. Acceptance of something doesn’t mean that you like it or that you think it’s fair. Acceptance doesn’t mean that you can’t do anything to change certain things. But before you can change anything you will have to learn to accept that real problems exist. You will also learn to accept your limitations. Your worries are always about something that *you should be doing*—you should make more money, make sure you don’t get sick, help someone else who hasn’t asked you for help. Worry puts you in the middle of the universe. In this step, you will learn that you can become more of an observer of reality and less of the determining force of the universe.

3. *Challenge your worried thinking.* You are constantly making predictions about the future (“I might fail”), reading people’s minds (“He thinks I’m a loser”), or thinking negative thoughts (“It would be awful if I didn’t get what I want”). I will give you ten ways to defeat these irrational and extreme thoughts so that your life can be more balanced. In this step, you will also learn how to identify what triggers your worry, common themes of your worry, and several techniques, such as how to practice worrying, in order to reduce your anxiety level.

4. *Focus on the deeper threat.* You worry about some things but not others. Why? Your core belief is the source of the worry. It may be your concern about being imperfect, being abandoned, feeling helpless, looking like a fool, or acting irresponsibly. Here you’ll find out how to identify and challenge these core beliefs about yourself that are causing you so much stress.

5. *Turn “failure” into opportunity.* Your worries are attempts to prepare for, prevent, and anticipate failure. Failure to you may seem like a catastrophic eventuality—something that can happen any minute unless you keep your guard up and worry. I will give you twenty things to say to yourself to overcome your fear of failure. Once you know how to handle failure, what would you have to worry about?

6. *Use your emotions rather than worry about them.* Worry is actually a strategy for avoiding unpleasant emotions. You are afraid of your feelings because you think you should be rational, in control, never upset, always clear in how you feel, and on top of things. Even though you recognize that you're a nervous wreck, your fear of your feelings drives you into more worry. Rather than trying to worry your emotions away, you will learn to experience them and use them to your advantage.

7. *Take control of time.* You feel controlled by a constant sense of urgency, the need to know everything right now. Here you will learn how to turn the urgency off and improve the present moment so that you can get more out of life right now.

Part 3, “Special Worries and How to Challenge Them,” addresses the five most common areas of worry—approval, relationships, health, finances, and work—and uses the seven-step approach to deal with them. Although each area of worry draws on the seven-step program, we will also examine specific issues involved in each area. For example, when we describe relationship worries, we will look at how your childhood experiences affected your view of relationships. When we discuss your health worries, we will evaluate your perfectionist ideas about appearance and physical functioning. And when we evaluate your money worries, we will also examine specific distortions in thinking that lead you to become obsessed with losing money.

Now, let's begin by looking at why you worry—and why you keep worrying.

PART 1

**THE
HOW AND WHY OF WORRY**

Understanding Worry

WORRY IS EVERYWHERE. All of us worry, including me. You are not alone. In fact, 38 percent of people worry every day. And many people describe themselves as chronic worriers—they say, “I’ve been a worrier all my life.” But that’s only a modest indication of how worry has come to impact every aspect of our lives, limiting our enjoyment and satisfaction. Worry is the central component of all the anxiety disorders and depression. Research shows that worry precedes the onset of depression—you literally worry yourself into depression. Fifty percent of the people in the United States have had serious problems with depression, anxiety, or substance abuse at some time.¹ Depression, anxiety, and substance abuse have increased during the past fifty years.²

The problem of worry is one that urgently needs a solution. To find one, we first need to understand it.

The Different Kinds of Worry

Let’s consider three people who worry.

- Jane is thirty-two years old and single. She and Roger just broke up after a two-year relationship. They had been talking about getting married, but Roger got cold feet, and Jane got fed up with him. She felt she didn’t want to wait forever for Roger to get his act together, so she broke it off. She knows she did the right thing, but now she worries: “Will I ever find a guy who can make a commitment?” and “Will I ever be able to have kids?” She sits in her apartment at night eating cookies and watching sitcoms.
- Brian is forty-five. He hasn’t filed his taxes for two years. He is sitting at home alone—just like Jane—thinking that he’s a loser for being so stupid not to file his taxes. He imagines the feds coming to his home and taking him away in handcuffs. Brian knows, in his rational mind, that he hasn’t committed a crime—his employer withheld the taxes, and he’s only late in filing. The worst case would probably be some kind of fine. But every time he sits down to start his taxes, his stomach clenches, his mind races, and he’s overcome by an overwhelming sense of dread. To avoid this feeling, he turns on ESPN and thinks, “I’ll wait for a better time.”
- Diane turns forty next month. She just had a complete medical exam two weeks ago, and everything is fine. But she feels a slight irregularity in her breast and begins to think, “What if this is cancer?” Even though the doctor assured her she is healthy, Diane knows you can never be too careful. Just six months ago she thought she had Lou Gehrig’s disease. Diane was relieved to learn she didn’t have a serious neurological problem—only a bad case of nerves. Diane knows her fears are real—even though everyone else tells her to see

therapist.

I could fill several volumes with stories about people who worry. One of the volumes could probably be written by you! We worry about everything—getting rejected, ending up alone, doing badly on an exam, not looking that good, what someone thinks of us, getting sick, falling off cliffs, crashing in airplanes, losing our money, being late, going crazy, having weird thoughts and feelings, being humiliated.

You find yourself puzzled with thoughts like these:

- I know that I keep predicting the worst, but I can't help myself.
- Even when people tell me it's going to be OK, I still can't stop worrying.
- I try to put these thoughts out of my mind, but they just keep coming back.
- I know it's not likely to happen, but what if I'm *the one*?
- Why can't I get control of my thoughts?
- Why am I driving myself crazy with these worries?

For example, Greg worries that things at work might go badly if he doesn't get this project done on time. Even if he gets it done, he thinks it might not be up to par. The boss could get angry at him. What if he gets so angry he decides to fire him? After all, three people were laid off last month. And then what would his wife think? She'd be disappointed. Now Greg notices that he's worrying again, and he thinks, "I'm worried all the time, and I can't get any control over this worry. I'll never get any sleep tonight, and then I'll be tired, and then I won't be able to get this project done." And so on in a vicious circle.

Greg has *generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)*, or what I call the "what-if disease." A lot of what we will discuss in this book relates directly to this particular kind of worry. If you have this problem, then you worry about a number of different things—money, health, relationships, safety, or performance. And you worry you don't have control of your worries. This is one of the longest-lasting anxiety disorders. You jump from one worry to another, predicting one catastrophe after another. Plus you worry about the fact that you are worrying so much. Not only are you worried, but you also have difficulty sleeping, are irritable and tense and tired, have indigestion, sweat a lot, and just feel nervous a good deal of the time. It's hard to relax. No wonder you are often depressed or have physical problems such as irritable bowel syndrome.³

About 7 percent of us have GAD. Women are twice as likely as men to have this problem. This is a chronic condition, with many people saying that they have been worriers all their lives.⁴ The first severe worry tends to begin during late adolescence or early adulthood. Most people with GAD never seek out psychotherapy; they generally see their doctor and complain about vague physical symptoms, such as fatigue, aches and pains, irritable bowel, and sleep problems. Those who do eventually go to therapy wait a long time before doing so—an average of ten years. In fact, worry is such a widespread problem that it may not even seem like a problem. That's because you think, "Oh, I'm just a worrier" and believe that there's nothing you can do about it. You think, "I've always been a worrier—and I always will be."

Worry is not limited to GAD. In addition to this general what-if disease, others confront more specific types of worry—a fear of a specific situation, for example. These more targeted

worries are part of every anxiety disorder and a central component of depression. This is important for two reasons. First, if you have GAD—or if you are a chronic worrier—then you probably have some problems with another anxiety disorder or depression. Second, if you cure your worry, your anxiety and depression should dramatically improve.

Look at the different kinds of worries and anxiety disorders in the table below and see if any of them fit you at times. You probably have some of the worries listed in this table.

<i>Worry</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>What You Avoid or Do</i>	<i>Anxiety Disorder</i>
Being evaluated by others Humiliation Rejection	They'll see I'm nervous. My hands will tremble. My mind will go blank.	<i>What you avoid</i> Speaking in public Meeting new people	Social anxiety disorder
Fear of a specific situation or thing	I'll fall over the edge. I'll drown. I'll get trapped. The plane will crash. It's dangerous.	<i>What you avoid</i> Heights Water Insects, snakes, rats Closed spaces Flying	Specific phobia
Leaving something undone, being contaminated, making mistakes, having thoughts and feelings that you fear	I didn't lock the door. I have germs on my hands. If I have a violent thought, I might act on it.	<i>What you do</i> Repeat actions over and over Check repeatedly Won't touch certain things Avoid situations or people that trigger your unwanted thoughts and feelings	Obsessive-compulsive disorder
Feeling that your physical sensations will go out of control and cause you to go crazy or get sick	My heart is beating rapidly—I will have a heart attack. I'm so dizzy I will fall. I'll get so anxious, I'll start to scream.	<i>What you avoid</i> Being in places—theaters, restaurants, airplanes—where your exit is blocked Open spaces—streets, malls, fields	Panic disorder

<i>Worry</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>What You Avoid or Do</i>	<i>Anxiety Disorder</i>
Believing that intrusive images and thoughts mean that something terrible is going to happen to you	I had another image of a disaster—I have to get out of here. I had a nightmare—it's dangerous.	<i>What you avoid</i> Situations associated with your initial trauma—people, places, movies, stories	Post-traumatic stress disorder
Thinking that the future is hopeless and bleak Having repetitive thoughts and feelings about your own suffering	Nothing will work out. I'll end up a failure. What's wrong with me? Why do I have so many problems?	<i>What you avoid</i> Doing things to help yourself—meeting people, taking on new challenges, establishing goals, and solving your problems	Depression

If you have social anxiety, then you worry that people will see you as weak, vulnerable, and anxious. You are shy, intimidated, afraid to speak in public, and worried that people will see that you are anxious. If you have post-traumatic stress disorder, then you worry that the intrusive images and frightening nightmares will never go away and that something terrible will happen. If you have specific fears, such as a fear of flying, then you worry that you will be injured or killed. And if you have obsessive-compulsive disorder, you worry you may have left something undone, or that you are contaminated, or that your thoughts will lead to dangerous impulses.

Now that you have evaluated the different kinds of worries you have for these different anxiety problems, let's take a closer look at why your worry persists—no matter how many times things turn out OK.

Why You Keep Worrying

You have mixed feelings about your worries. On one hand, your worries are bothering you—you can't sleep, and you can't get these pessimistic thoughts out of your head. But there is a way that these worries make sense to you. For example, you think:

- Maybe I'll find a solution.
- I don't want to overlook anything.
- If I keep thinking a little longer, maybe I'll figure it out.
- I don't want to be surprised.
- I want to be responsible.

You have a hard time giving up on your worries because, in a sense, your worries have been working for you.

Your Parents Taught You to Worry

Where did all of this worry come from?

It's interesting that worriers don't generally describe terrible things happening in their recent lives. In fact, nothing unusual seems to be happening in their lives. No big traumas, few big losses—at least not now.

- *Trauma.* Chronic worriers had a higher level of trauma—especially physical threat of harm—when they were kids. But as adults, chronic worriers were *least likely* to worry about physical threat!⁵ One reason is that they may avoid thinking about things that are upsetting. College students who worried a lot said that they worry about certain things because they don't want to think about *other* things that might be more frightening.⁶ This is important because—as you will see later—a lot of worry is an attempt to avoid your emotions.
- *Worried and overprotective parents.* Adults who worry had parents who worried. The children may very well have imitated this style of worried thinking. The mothers of worriers were overprotective and tried to protect their kids from what they saw as a dangerous world. “Don't stay out too late—it's dangerous” and “Don't forget to wear your gloves” and “Be sure that you watch and look both ways when you cross the street.” The message was that you've got to always keep your guard up, and you've got to control your environment.

Many of these mothers combined this overprotection with a lack of warmth. These mothers were controlling and intrusive but showed very little affection. The child learned, “Not only is the world unsafe and I am not competent (because my mother has to tell me what to do) but there's no safe and comfortable place for me to go for support.”

- *Reversed parenting.* These mothers often made the child take on the role of acting as the parent to the mother. The mother shared her problems with the kid and hoped the child would soothe her. This reversal of roles contributes to the tendency to worry later—especially to worry about what other people think and feel. One worrier told me that her mother's reversal of roles made her feel that there was no one to protect *her*. So she worried.

An offshoot of this is that the most common worry for chronic worriers is concern about relationships. Worriers are most concerned they are not nurturing and caring enough toward other people. They worry about letting other people down, that other people are upset with them, and that other people are unhappy. In fact, worriers tend to be better than nonworriers in anticipating the feelings of other people.⁸

- *Parents dismissed emotion.* Worriers had parents who treated the child's emotions as if they were an annoyance or as if the child was self-indulgent for having painful or unpleasant feelings. Thus, these kids grow up thinking that they can't have emotions and that no one will be supportive of them.
- *Insecure attachments.* Adults who worry are more likely to have had a parent who died before the child was sixteen. The loss of a parent may make the child more worried about

other interpersonal losses such as relationships breaking up, people being upset with them or any conflicts and arguments that might arise. They often had very insecure attachments with their parents. This means that they were not always sure that their parents would be there for them, couldn't count on their parents paying attention to them, or feared that their parents might leave or die.

A woman who worried about her relationship ending told me that her mother used to threaten suicide when she was a kid. She now felt that any relationship could end at any time unless she was vigilant.⁹ Another woman worried about her finances and being left alone, although she was independently wealthy and had numerous friends. She explained that when she was a girl her mother would complain about pains in her chest and would tell her that there were all kinds of danger out there. She feared that her mother would die if she went out and played for too long. In fact, she told me that she felt that she couldn't do things on her own because she thought it could kill her mother. As irrational as this might sound, this continued to be a fear for her as an adult.

- *Shame.* Mothers of people who are shy were very focused on shame as a way to control their kids. They say things like "What will people think?" or "I am really disappointed in you" or "Don't let anyone know that you did that." Shame makes you feel that who you are and what you are needs to be hidden. Kids who grow up with parents like this are ashamed that people will see them as flawed or nervous.

It Makes Sense to You

I don't believe that people want to be anxious or want to suffer. In fact, worry is a way that people think they can avoid having *worse* things happen. Worry is your strategy to adapt to a reality that you view as uncertain, out of control, dangerous, and filled with problems. You view worry as a way to act responsibly, prevent your worst fears from happening, motivate yourself to get things done, and avoid the unpleasant feelings that you believe are right below the surface. Until you recognize why worry makes sense and why your theories about worry may be wrong, you may be reluctant to give up on worry. Let's look at these ideas more closely.

1. *You believe that worry helps you solve problems.* People worry and ruminate because they think that they will find an answer to their problems. They believe that worry will prepare them, protect them, and prevent bad things from happening. When researchers ask people what they hope to gain from worrying about bad things, they say, "Maybe I'll figure out a way to solve my problems" or "Maybe I'll figure out what's wrong."¹⁰

2. *You believe the world is dangerous and that you are unable to cope.* You believe that terrible things are likely to happen, so you worry in order to prevent these things from happening. Worriers attend to threatening information (for example, signs of rejection) and interpret ambiguous information as threatening.¹¹ Ambiguous information could be something like "I'm not sure how Carol really feels, but I bet she is not talking to me because she doesn't like

me.” Worriers have their antenna out looking for threat. They see danger even when it isn’t there. They have the radar up and running because it always seems like it’s wartime.

In one study, worriers were asked to write down their worries over a two-week period and predict what would happen. In fact, 85 percent of the actual outcomes were *positive*. Things almost always turn out better than you think. Also, 79 percent of the time worriers cope with different negative outcomes better than they expected they would.¹²

Worriers assume that the world is filled with opportunities for rejection and failure and that their predictions are accurate. One woman, after the disastrous events of September 11 in New York City, thought the chances that she would be killed in the future by a terrorist attack were 100 percent. Other worriers believe that it is likely that they will have a serious illness, go bankrupt, or fail in their relationships. They are guided by pervasive pessimism.

3. *Worry helps you avoid thinking about the worst possible outcome.* You focus on things that you can catch early that will prevent some feared future disaster from occurring.¹³ Although I just said in the section above that you might worry about the worst possible outcome, what you actually do is worry about all the bad outcomes that happen *before* the worst outcome could occur. The rationale behind this is “If I can notice all the smaller things that happen before the catastrophe, I can catch it early and avoid thinking or imagining that catastrophe.”

For example, a dentist worried that his practice would shrink. He was anxious whenever a patient canceled or whenever he had an empty hour: “Gee, I have empty slots in my schedule. My income is dropping. I wonder if there’s a downturn in my practice. I wonder if Dr. Smith is not referring to me because the last patient didn’t work out. I wonder if I might be losing my contacts with referral sources. I wonder if I should call up Dr. Smith and have lunch with him.”

He did not allow himself to go to the most feared thought: “My practice will completely collapse and I will be bankrupt.” He avoided this thought by focusing on the immediate events in front of him—a patient canceling—and then tried to figure out how they could be avoided in the future.

When I ask chronic worriers to try to think through the string of events that could lead to the worst possible outcome, they actually *take longer* to get to the worst outcome. They keep coming up with less than the worst outcome, or all the things that happen before the worst outcome. This is important: since chronic worriers focus on little things to be caught and changed (if possible), they seldom face their worst fears—the fears of a terrible catastrophe. As a result, they don’t have the opportunity to *reject* that fear.

4. *Your worry keeps you from feeling powerful emotions.* People have probably said to you, “You think too much.” There’s some truth to this. Worry is a way that you avoid feelings by “overthinking.” As a worrier, you are thinking more than feeling. You try to think about problems rather than feel your emotions. Worry is your way of “keeping it in your head” and not feeling the emotional impact.

5. *You are not anxious when you are worried.* While you are worrying, your anxiety level does not increase. Worriers and nonworriers respond very differently to threat. When nonworriers look at a threatening image, they feel afraid and their heart rates go up. With repeated exposure to the threatening image, their anxiety goes down. But for worriers, the process is very different. Worriers tend to be at higher levels of tension at most times, so when a threatening image is presented, the chronic worrier shows no increase. It's as if he's experiencing it as a "normal threat."

The worrier shows no decrease with repeated exposure to the threatening image.¹⁴ This is very important, because with almost all other things that we fear, we find ourselves less afraid the longer we stay in the situation. Thus, if I am afraid of taking an elevator but I take it a thousand times, I become much less afraid. But this does not happen with worriers. Worriers take a much longer time to become less anxious when they view a threat. *It's as if they are not feeling the threat.* This is because worriers are always on guard—in a state of tension. Your worry suppresses your anxiety because you actually think you are doing something constructive when you are worrying. However, when you stop worrying, your anxiety level goes up.¹⁵ It's as if your anxiety incubates when you worry. That's why worriers are actually more anxious in general, even though they are less anxious when they are actually worrying!

6. *Worry gives you the illusion of control.* If you are a worrier, someone has probably called you a "control freak." When you are anxious, you believe that things will go out of control. You try to control what will happen by thinking about all the worst possibilities and then finding solutions. You're saying to yourself, "I've got to find out how things can go wrong and then make sure it doesn't happen." You're trying to solve a problem before it becomes a bigger problem—before it becomes a *catastrophe*.

Because you feel that things or events are out of your control, you turn to worry to gain control. You keep thinking, "What can go wrong?" and "How can I control it?" When we anticipate danger or threat, we attempt to gain some control. For example, if you have a fear of dogs, you manifest control by avoiding dogs when you see them on the sidewalk. If you have an obsessive concern about contamination, you manifest control by washing your hands thirty times. If you worry about making a fool of yourself in front of strangers, you might hold on to the side of a table to make yourself feel steady. You search for some way to control things. We call these "safety behaviors" because they make you feel safe. You are actually using your worry as a way of gaining control. Since you worry before the bad thing *might* happen, and it does not happen, you begin to think that the worry prevented a bad outcome.

So if I am worried about bad things happening—failing the test, getting run over by a bus, getting rejected by every woman I talk to—but these things do not actually happen, why don't I just immediately abandon all of my worries and become the happy guy I was meant to be? Because my primitive brain is saying something like this: "Bob, let's put two and two together. You've been worrying about the test, the bus, and all these women. You didn't fail the test, you haven't been hit by a bus, and not *all* the women reject you. So nothing terrible

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