



Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program

How to Worry Less and Reduce Anxiety

“If your problem has a solution, why worry about it? If your problem has no solution, why worry about it? ~Buddhist proverb

In general, worrying is a result of an overtaxed nervous system. When you are chronically stressed, you will try to anticipate what is going to happen in the future in order to illuminate potential dangers or threats. Worrying doesn't accomplish much, even though it makes you feel busy because your mind is racing. What worrying does accomplish is getting you into a bad mood and potentially alienating you from others if you become agitated and bossy; worrying is a form of attempted control, and perpetual worrywarts tend to spread their worrying out to others around them (telling others what to do, snapping irritably at other people, etc.) In addition, the more you mentally “freak out” with worry and stress, the less able you will be to think clearly or rationally because of the brain damage that occurs when you keep your mind in a stressful state.

It doesn't help that worrying has become a national pastime and, for law students, it is an occupational hazard. As Americans, we are trained and encouraged by the media to see the world through fearful, worrisome eyes, and as a law student, the pressures and stress of “making the grade,” finding externships, competing in moot court, and eventually taking the bar exam can lead to a constant state of worrying about the future. There is good news, however. Methods to reduce your tendency to worry are very easy to accomplish: slow down, direct your thoughts, and problem solve.

Some people believe that worrying is a form of problem solving, but you can tell the difference between the two by the way you feel. When you are problem solving, you get excited, feel invigorated and look forward to seeing the solution come to fruition. You might collaborate with others. As Mother Teresa said: “You can do what I cannot do. I can do what you cannot do. Together, we can do great things.” Problem solving encourages sociability, risk taking, creativity, and openness. On the other hand, worrying encourages secrecy, anger, irritability, all-or-nothing thinking, and inflexibility. When you worry, you will: become restless, experience appetite changes, lose sleep, experience your muscles getting tight, get sick, and have no interest in “having fun.” Compassion, love, humor, self-esteem, and excitement metaphorically go out the window. You will want nothing to do with fun when you are worrying.

The next time you find yourself worrying, try to reframe your efforts as a problem solving exercise. Rather than allowing “doom and gloom” thoughts to spin through your mind, ask yourself what the real problem is that you are addressing. Is it really about the person you are projecting or attributing negative thoughts to? Are you afraid of an outcome over which you have no control? Are you metaphorically “living in the past” and allowing past outcomes to cloud your judgment or anticipation of this outcome? Most likely, the real problem has nothing to do with the storyline; when you worry, the real issue is almost always simpler than you make it out to be.

For example, imagine that you are having the exterior of your home painted and you are worrying about the project as your thoughts race from “did I pick the right company to do the job” to “did we choose the right colors?” You might start imagining negative outcomes. Maybe you even try to micromanage the painters and become demanding or irritable with them as they work. One way to turn the issue into a problem solving exercise is to first identify how your body feels. Are your shoulders tight? Is your stomach in a knot? Then identify the emotions you are feeling. Is it fear? Panic? Anger? Try to identify the emotions without getting attached to them. Distracting yourself from the “storyline” helps the brain access its problem solving areas. Once you have identified how your physical body and emotions feel, you can ask yourself what is actually upsetting you. Most likely, it is simply a fear of the unknown and, because you believe that things aren’t done correctly unless you do them yourself, you aren’t able to “let it go.” Now you know the problem: it has nothing to do with the painters or the paint colors; it has to do with your own fear. That’s easy to problem solve. Just think about the type of advice you would give someone who told you that they were fearful of the future. You would reassure them that no matter what happens, they will be able to handle it. You would remind them of the resources they have to handle something should it go wrong. Apply that advice to yourself, and what you were worrying about doesn’t seem like such a “big deal” anymore.

Changing a mind that has been chronically stressed with worrying into a calm, peaceful mind might take dedication and discipline, but it isn’t difficult. Because worrying is about thoughts, you learn to direct your thoughts away from the stressors. Worrying is a tendency related to our survival mechanisms, and survival is a powerful force.

Another way to direct your thoughts is to distract yourself on something funny or positive. When you feel better, you can decide if what you were thinking about is really worth the brain damage (literally) or if you need to approach the topic in your mind from a broader, more integrated perspective. Asking people you trust to brainstorm the issue with you is another way you can “get out of your head,” and “get out of your own way.” Brainstorming with people that

you respect broadens the narrowly focused worried brain and you can access parts of your mind that were previously closed. In addition, working with others to solve a problem activates the social nervous system, which is an antidote to the part of the nervous system responsible for the fight-or-flight response. Connecting with others in a positive way reduces anxiety and stress, a great solution to worrying!

Whether you reframe your worrying as problem solving, distract yourself long enough to determine how useful the worrying actually is, or you engage others in your attempt to solve the puzzle in your mind, remember to slow down. As anxiety and worry increases, so do our thoughts, our heartbeat, our blood pressure, etc. This arousal response clouds our judgment. When you mindfully slow down your thoughts, actions, and breathing, you will signal to the nervous system that you are not in a life threatening emergency. As the nervous system relaxes, your mood will improve, and you will be able to see through a clearer and more rational lens.

If you would like to read more on how to reduce your tendency to worry, click on the links below:

<http://www.healthcentral.com/anxiety/c/1443/119324/flight-anxiety/>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/why-we-worry/201206/the-myth-the-born-worrier>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/why-we-worry/201310/10-delusional-beliefs-held-chronic-worriers>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evil-deeds/201011/essential-secrets-psychotherapy-why-we-worry-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>

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