

COPING WITH ANXIETY AND WORRY

Worrying can be helpful when it spurs you to take action and solve a problem. But if you're preoccupied with "what ifs" and worst-case scenarios, worry becomes a problem.

Unrelenting doubts and fears can be paralysing.

They can sap your emotional energy, send your anxiety levels soaring, and interfere with life at home and at work.

However, chronic worrying is a mental habit that can be broken. You can train your brain to stay calm and look at life from a more positive perspective.

What you can do

It's normal for people to experience anxiety and worry from time to time, but to quickly move on and ensure you don't get bogged down with it, go through the following in your head:

1. Is the problem solvable?
2. Challenge the reality of anxious thoughts.
3. Accept uncertainty.
4. Be aware of how other people affect you.
5. Focus on the present rather than the past or the future.

Why is it so hard to stop worrying?

No one likes the way constant worrying makes you feel, so why is it so difficult to stop?

The answer lies in the beliefs—both negative and positive—you have about worrying.

On the negative side, you may be concerned that your constant worrying is going to spiral completely out of control, drive you crazy, or damage your health and you might even recognise that it isn't always an especially productive use of your time and energy.

On the positive side, you may believe that your worrying helps you avoid bad things, prepare for the worst, or come up with solutions. You may even believe that worrying shows you're a caring and conscientious or diligent person.

Negative beliefs, or worrying about worrying, add to your anxiety and keep it going (much in the same way worrying about getting to sleep often keeps you awake).

However it's the 'positive' beliefs about worrying that can be even more damaging. It's tough to break the worry habit if you believe that your worrying protects you or that there is an intangible virtue to be had in giving airtime to these thoughts and feelings.

In order to stop worry and anxiety for good, you must give up your belief that worrying serves a positive purpose. Once you realise that worrying is the problem, not the solution, you can regain control of your worried mind.



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Ask yourself, is the problem solvable?

Research shows that while you're worrying, you temporarily feel less anxious.

Running over the problem in your head distracts you from your emotions and makes you feel like you're getting something accomplished. But worrying and problem solving are two very different things.

Problem solving involves evaluating a situation, coming up with concrete steps for dealing with it, and then putting the plan into action.

Worrying, on the other hand, rarely leads to solutions.

No matter how much time you spend dwelling on worst-case scenarios, you're no more prepared to deal with them should they actually happen.

Distinguish between solvable and unsolvable worries

If a worry pops into your head, start by asking yourself whether the problem is something you can actually solve.

The following questions can help:

- Is the problem something you're currently facing, rather than an imaginary what-if?
- If the problem is an imaginary what-if, how likely is it to happen? Is your concern realistic?
- Can you do something about the problem or prepare for it, or is it out of your control?

Productive, solvable worries are those you can take action on right away.

For example, if you're worried about your bills, you could call your creditors to see about flexible payment options.

Unproductive, unsolvable worries are those for which there is no corresponding action, such as "What if I get cancer someday?" or "What if my kid gets into an accident?"

If the worry is solvable, start brainstorming. Make a list of all the possible solutions you can think of.

Try not to get too hung up on finding the perfect solution. Focus on the things you have the power to change, rather than the circumstances or realities beyond your control.

After you've evaluated your options, make a plan of action.

Once you have a plan and start doing something about the problem, you'll feel much less worried.

Dealing with unsolvable worries

But what if the worry isn't something you can solve? If you're a chronic worrier, the vast majority of your anxious thoughts probably fall in this camp. In such cases, it's important to tune into your emotions.

Worrying helps you avoid unpleasant emotions. Worrying keeps you in your head, thinking about how to solve problems rather than allowing yourself to feel the underlying emotions.

But you can't worry your emotions away. While you're worrying, your feelings are temporarily suppressed, but as soon as you stop, they bounce back.

And then, you start worrying about your feelings: "What's wrong with me? I shouldn't feel this way!"



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Learn to embrace your feelings

This may seem scary at first because of negative beliefs you have about your emotions. For example, you may believe that you should always be rational and in control, that your feelings should always make sense, or that you shouldn't feel certain emotions, such as fear or anger.

The truth is that emotions – like life – are messy. They don't always make sense and they're not always pleasant, but as long as you can accept that your feelings are part of being human, you'll be able to experience them without becoming overwhelmed and learn how to use them to your advantage.

Challenge anxious thoughts

If you suffer from chronic anxiety and worries, chances are you look at the world in ways that make it seem more dangerous than it really is. For example, you may overestimate the possibility that things will turn out badly, jump immediately to worst-case scenarios, or treat every negative thought as if it were a fact.

You may also discredit your own ability to handle life's problems, assuming you'll fall apart at the first sign of trouble. These irrational, pessimistic attitudes are known as cognitive distortions.

Although cognitive distortions aren't based on reality, they're not easy to give up. Often, they're part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that's become so automatic you're not even completely aware of it.

In order to break these bad thinking habits and stop the worry and anxiety they bring, you must retrain your brain.

Start by identifying the frightening thought, being as detailed as possible about what scares or worries you.

Then, instead of viewing your thoughts as facts, treat them as hypotheses you're testing out. As you examine and challenge your worries and fears, you'll develop a more balanced perspective.

Stop worrying by questioning the anxious thought

- What's the evidence that the thought is true? That it's not true?
- Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?
- What's the probability that what I'm scared of will actually happen?
- If the probability is low, what are some more likely outcomes?
- Is the thought helpful? How will worrying about it help me and how will it hurt me?
- What would I say to a friend who had this worry?



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Be aware of how other people affect you

How you feel is affected by the company you keep, whether you're aware of it or not. Studies show that emotions are contagious. We quickly "catch" moods from other people—even from strangers who never speak a word (e.g. the terrified woman sitting by you on the plane; the fuming man in the checkout line).

The people you spend a lot of time with have an even greater impact on your mental state.

Keep a worry diary.

You may not be aware of how people or situations are affecting you. Maybe this is the way it's always been in your family, or you've been dealing with the stress so long that it feels normal.

Try keeping a worry diary for a week or so. Every time you start to worry, jot down the thought and what triggered it.

Over time, you'll start to see patterns.

Spend less time with people who make you anxious.

Is there someone in your life who drags you down or always seems to leave you feeling stressed?

Think about cutting back on the time you spend with that person or establish healthier relationship boundaries.

For example, you might set certain topics off-limits, if you know that talking about them with that person makes you anxious.

Choose your confidantes carefully.

Know who to talk to about situations that make you anxious.

Some people will help you gain perspective or develop a way forward, while others will feed into your worries, doubts, and fears without making constructive or helpful suggestions on how to solve the problem.

This isn't because they're bad people or bad friends, but it's important to know their strengths and weaknesses as well as your own when it comes to seeking advice from friends.

Practice mindfulness

Worrying is usually focused on the future—on what might happen and what you'll do about it.

The centuries-old practice of mindfulness can help you break free of your worries by bringing your attention back to the present.

In contrast to the previous techniques of challenging your anxious thoughts or postponing them to a worry period, this strategy is based on observing and then letting them go.

Together, the combination of strategies can help you identify where your thinking is causing problems, while helping you get in touch with your emotions.

Using mindfulness meditation to stay focused on the present is a simple concept, but it takes practice to reap the benefits. Experiment with the exercises on the following pages and see how they work to reducing your worry and anxiety.



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Mindfulness and Meditation

Mindfulness is the ability to maintain a real-time, moment by moment awareness of our thoughts and emotions, our body's reaction to stress and the environment, and an overall awareness of our health and mental health.

This helps us to focus on the present moment, and avoid being preoccupied with past events or fears for the future. By concentrating on the things and people around us and the present moment, we will reduce stress and improve our outlook on the world.

There are a lot of great free apps you can use to guide you through breathing techniques and meditation that can help ease your anxiety and clear your mind of anxious thoughts.

Also, trying yoga as a way to relax and as gentle exercise can boost your mood.

Meditation Example

Find a place where you can sit quietly and undisturbed for a few moments. To begin, you might want to set a timer for about 10 minutes, but after some experience you should not be too concerned about the length of time you spend meditating.

Begin by bringing your attention to the present moment by noticing your breathing. Pay attention to your breath as it enters and then leaves your body.

Before long, your mind will begin to wander, pulling you out of the present moment. That's ok.

Notice your thoughts and feelings as if you are an outside observer watching what's happening in your brain. Take note, and allow yourself to return to your breathing.

Sometimes you might feel frustrated or bored. That's fine-these are just a few more feelings to notice. Your mind might start to plan a weekend, or worry about responsibility.

Notice where your thoughts are going, and accept what's happening.

Whenever you are able to, return your concentration to your breathing.

Continue this process until your timer rings, or until you are ready to be done.

Body Scan

During the *Body Scan* exercise you will pay close attention to physical sensations throughout your body.

The goal isn't to change or relax your body, but instead to notice and become more aware of it. Don't worry too much about how long you practice, but do move slowly.

Begin by paying attention to the sensations in your feet. Notice any sensations such as warmth, coolness, pressure, pain, or a breeze moving over your skin.

Slowly move up your body-to your calves, thighs, pelvis, stomach, chest, back, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, neck, and finally your head. Spend some time on each of these body parts, just noticing the sensations.

After you travel up your body, begin to move back down, through each body part, until you reach your feet again.

Remember: move slowly, and just pay attention.



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Mindfulness and Meditation

Five Senses Exercise

Use this exercise to quickly ground yourself in the present when you only have a moment. The goal is to notice something that you are experiencing through each of your senses.

What are 5 things you can see?

Look around you and notice 5 things you hadn't noticed before. Maybe a pattern on a wall, light reflecting from a surface, or a knick-knack.

What are 4 things you can feel?

Maybe you can feel the pressure of your feet on the floor, your shirt resting on your shoulders, or the temperature on your skin. Pick up an object and notice its texture.

What are 3 things you can hear?

Notice all the background sounds you had been filtering out, such as an air-conditioning, birds chirping, or cars on a distant street.

What are 2 things you can smell?

Maybe you can smell flowers, coffee, or freshly cut grass. It doesn't have to be a nice smell either: maybe there's an overflowing rubbish bin or road fumes.

What is 1 thing you can taste?

Pop a piece of gum in your mouth, sip a drink, eat a snack if you have one, or simply notice how your mouth tastes. 'Taste' the air to see how it feels on your tongue.

The numbers for each sense are only a guideline. Feel free to do more or less of each. Try the exercise while doing an activity like washing dishes, listening to music, or going for a walk.

What Hunterlink can do

We know it can be a daunting process to pick up the phone when you are already in distress, but please know that we are here for you 24/7 with our fully qualified and registered counsellors ready to help you anytime of the day or night.

We provide **confidential** telephone or face-to-face support sessions, as well as access to these services for immediate family members.

Remember, you don't have to be in a crisis situation to contact Hunterlink.