

## What To Do With Worry

Few of us welcome worry into our life, yet nearly all of us experience it.

### WHAT IS WORRY?

Worry is thinking about what may happen, or has already happened in an obsessive way, repeatedly asking, "What will I do? What should I have done?" Worry falls between concern, which is a milder form of worry; and anxiety, a more intense version of worry that carries physical symptoms like stomachaches or changes in breathing.

Worry is unpleasant, but actually has some positive uses. In "The Mindfulness & Acceptance Workbook for Anxiety", Dr. John Forsyth and Dr. Georg Eifert tell us worry is useful and adaptive. It can help us avoid dangerous situations or prepare us to respond physically (fleeing) or with language (Hey, get out of there!). It can spur us to plan ahead and prepare for contingencies. For example, firefighters are highly trained for emergencies to lessen their worry on the job. Worry can be a signal that there is something wrong or a process needs to be changed. It can then encourage us to explore possibilities and search for new information. It can also inspire creative problem solving or scrutiny of an important issue.

### WORRY IN THE FIRE SERVICE

Chuck Wehrli, a retired fire captain for the city of Naperville, thinks worry is especially common for firefighters. "We are always trying to overcome worrying in regards to our job, especially at incidents," he said. "Our training and our gut feelings take over, helping us make life threatening decisions. I always tell firefighters that if you want to move up as an Officer you better be prepared to accept the consequences that could include injuries and death of victims and your firefighters."

While facing this reality, firefighters might wonder, how can worry be prevented? In the "Worry Control Workbook," Mary Ellen Copeland's study on worry revealed that when people feel unhealthy, their worrying increases. They worry not just about their health, but also about everything. Therefore, staying healthy builds a solid foundation for decreasing worry in your life. Get enough rest, eat three meals a day, and avoid junk food, sugar, and alcohol, especially when you are on active duty. Incorporate regular exercise, at least a half hour a day, into your routine. Feeling better overall will increase your sense of well-being and decrease your worry.

## CAN WE CONTROL WORRY?

Copeland says while we can't always control the situation causing us to worry (which is always the case for firefighters on the job, and even sometimes at home), we can control how we deal with it. Here are some techniques:

### 1. Problem Solving

A productive way to control worry is to do something about it. First, write down the situation that is bothering you. Then, brainstorm ways to improve or correct the situation, (such as preparing for contingencies) and think through which ones are feasible. Finally, make a contract with yourself to complete a positive step towards your chosen, most realistic solution. Set a due date. Before you know it, the problem and the worry may both be gone.

### 2. Change Negative Thoughts to Positive Ones

Our negative thoughts can lead us to worry. We can learn to identify them, "catch them" in action and reframe them into a beneficial, positive statement. For example:

Negative thought: My life is over.

Positive thought: My life is different, but worth living.

Negative thought: This will just get worse and worse.

Positive thought: I'm doing the best I can to deal with this.

Negative thought: Why me?

Positive thought: Difficult things happen to everyone.

### 3. Be Present in the Moment

If you are thinking about the here and now, you are not worrying about the past or future. If you intensely concentrate on the moment, you will have no ability to think about anything else. If other thoughts intrude, refocus on the present and notice the effect it has on your worry.

### 4. Take a Reality Check

Many of us worry about things that are very unlikely to happen. Truthfully discern the likelihood of the worry actually happening. Is your worrying helpful, or a good use of time? Will you prevent the situation by worrying about it? Problem solve (technique 1) if it is in your control, or divert yourself from the worry.

### 5. Diversionary Activities

Engaging in an enjoyable task helps distract from worries. While this sounds overly simplistic, there is actually a neurological reason for its effectiveness, demonstrated in a psychological technique called the Linden Method. When your brain finds it more interesting to focus on your diversion than on your anxiety, you replace anxious neural pathways in your brain with new non-anxious neural pathways. The Linden Method requires a daily commitment to the diversion, engaging in it as long as you possibly can. Also, the diversion should be something creative, challenging, and well loved.

## DO I NEED HELP WITH MY WORRY?

A Penn State study showed that one in four persons will meet the criteria for anxiety disorder at some point in their lives. Intense, frequent, and urgent worry can carry us to the far end of the worry spectrum into anxiety. If your worry causes physical symptoms like interruptions in or lack of sleep, stomachaches, irregular breathing, and the inability to participate in daily activities, please seek help from a licensed FPS counselor. With help, you can control your worry, instead of letting it control you.



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