How to Worry More Mindfully

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During times of high-stakes uncertainty, it's normal to stress about potential threats and negative outcomes, and it can be tougher to resist anxious thoughts given that the coronavirus has disrupted the usual ways we comfort ourselves.

But getting lost in worries is emotionally depleting, and it interferes with moving forward. That's why it's worth improving how you handle this pesky mental habit.

Many of us worry because we feel that it helps us plan. It's tempting to keep unsettling issues top of mind — the same way we review our to-dos — to prepare.

"Our minds will try to solve a problem, even if it's a problem that can't be solved by us," said Lizabeth Roemer, a professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and an author of "Worry Less, Live More: The Mindful Way Through Anxiety Workbook."

As a psychologist, some of my clients describe associating worrying with warding off bad outcomes. And it can appear as if that strategy works, since most of our worries never materialize. But none of us can control the future with our thoughts.

We may also worry because it feels like a way to do something when we feel helpless. There's some logic in that, and even some science: When we worry, we may feel less afraid, since worrying involves thinking rather than feeling.

Despite how instinctual this habit feels, confusing worrying with coping robs you of moments of peace. And isn't life already challenging enough?

What ultimately helps is being present, even if that means sitting with uncertainty, sadness and, yes, a certain amount of worry — approached intentionally. Here are some of my favorite evidence-based strategies to finding clarity when your worries feel overwhelming.

Accept your worries

You can't choose what shows up in your mind, but you can observe — without judging — thoughts that don't empower you. Many of our emotional struggles stem from our response to our worries rather than their content. People often assume that they need to worry, and then feel guilty that they can't control their worrying. But by targeting those conflicting beliefs, it's possible to free yourself from traps like worrying about worry.

Instead, practice seeing your worries neutrally, the same way you might glance up and notice skywriting. You can observe, "There is the thought that …," and then decide if it's worth engaging with immediately. If you can take a step to problem solve, go for it. If not, turn your mind back to the moment, just as you screen out a robocall.

Keep in mind that letting thoughts go is not the same as pushing them away, which leads to them returning with vigor. Also sidestep asking others for reassurance, since no one can enduringly promise that all will be OK. And when thoughts get so blaring that it's hard to perceive them as mere ideas, immerse yourself in a brief, captivating activity, like watching a hilarious video clip, until you gain perspective.

Free yourself from mental multitasking

Usually when you're worrying, you're only partly attending to your thoughts. With concerns stealthily arising, it's easy to feel as if you have a personal threat ticker contaminating your head space at inopportune moments. With worry, as in the rest of life, it can be difficult to perform when multitasking.

In the 1980s, Dr. Thomas Borkovec, a professor emeritus in psychology at Pennsylvania State University and leading expert on anxiety, developed a paradoxical intervention: Encouraging chronic worriers to carve out time to worry. By planning when to worry, you can cut hours of intrusive worrying.

When my clients are skeptical about scheduling worry, I tell them it may sound like a simple hack, but the practice hinges on behavioral science. First, it encourages self-monitoring, or tracking when and where your mind wanders. Second, by setting aside a space for worry, you'll be less likely to associate worry with a wide variety of activities. This concept is known as stimulus control: By reducing the amount of time you worry, it's easier to break the all-day worry habit. Finally, deciding to worry for a longer period rather than jumping in and out of half-attended-to thoughts is a form of exposure therapy, a gold standard treatment for anxiety.

Experiencing what you fear when you are wanting to avoid allows you to learn that your thoughts and feelings come and go. You'll also come to appreciate that you don't have to worry to manage. The current is not the constant.

Make a worry appointment

Rather than recommending the impossible, "Don't worry!" I prescribe 20 to 30 minutes of Dr. Borkovec's concentrated worry time to my clients, encouraging them not to do this right before bed or first thing in the morning, especially if they tend to wake up with a sense of dread. Instead, my clients plan a more constructive time to either try a single session or two, 15-minute ones. If you have an array of worries, you can also set times for specific topics, such as financial stressors or health concerns, limiting your total worry time to half an hour.

During your worry period, feel free to list your worries, or, ideally, take steps if your concerns lend themselves to problem solving. Writing down worries ahead of time actually improves problem solving since we're able to perform better when our worries aren't taking up our mental space. A 2011 study led by cognitive scientists Dr. Gerardo Ramirez and Dr. Sian Beilock highlights this benefit: Students who struggled with academic anxiety took 10 minutes to journal about their fears before a big exam, which significantly improved their performance.

After your worry time, postpone worries until your next worry session, just as you might answer your emails in a batch rather than letting them interrupt your flow. When you inevitably catch yourself entertaining pop-up worries, don't blow a loud whistle at yourself — that's not the compassionate stance that will free you. Rather, speak to yourself as a friend would, putting a metaphorical hand on your shoulder to warmly whisper, "It's OK, you don't have to do this right now."

Sometimes when I suggest this approach, my clients wonder if, by scheduling worry, they will get themselves stuck in an endless distressing loop. I explain that many people who struggle with obsessive compulsive disorder and find themselves bombarded with disturbing thoughts, like intrusive ideas of harming a loved one, are encouraged to similarly sit with thoughts to realize that mental events aren't dangerous. I also encourage coming up with a strategy to prevent worry appointments from spiraling into ruminating, like noticing sights and sounds, to return to your current reality.

Plan times outside of worry to be fully present

Often, when I ask clients how their worry time is going, they report that they actually start to feel bored by their concerns or that they feel more at peace with difficult circumstances. Some tell me that they forget their worry appointments. I'm always happy to hear this, but I remind them that the goal isn't what happens when they're worrying; it's about being more effective during the rest of their lives.

To improve your ability to be in the moment, schedule rituals, like leaving your phone at home and taking a daily walk or savoring your breakfast without jumping from news headlines to work emails. Even if your worry habit tries to interrupt you ("What if I miss something important?!"*),* mindfulness correlates with improving how you manage whatever life throws your way.

Take a study led by two psychologists, Dr. Joanna Arch and Dr. Michelle Craske at the University of California, Los Angeles. The researchers divided participants into groups: One group listened to a recording on focused breathing while the other listened to a recording that provoked worrying. Afterward, when both groups viewed negative images, the participants from the worry group responded more negatively versus those who had practiced staying present. In other words, worrying depletes us, while being present facilitates facing challenges.

"Our minds act on habit," Dr. Roemer said. "We want to help our minds develop habits that help us thrive and live as fully as possible, even in the midst of the pain."

So, let's try to remember, when reality feels so messy, we all deserve a little more space, even if all we can manage is our minds.

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