

Top Ten Tips to Reduce Worry

1. Set aside a “Worry time”

People often find it difficult to stop worrying. Worry tends to intrude into their mind at all times, interfering with work or other activities. A useful way of dealing with too much worry intruding in one’s mind is to set aside a “worry time”. This can be, for example, half an hour just after work. At any other time, when a worrying issue comes to mind, acknowledge to yourself that you need to think it through, and note that you will do so during your “worry time”. At the appointed time, think the issue through and try to use one of the approaches below. Before then, give yourself permission to put it out of your mind and to get on with the task at hand.

2. Is the problem solvable?

Worrying partly functions as a problem solving process. It alerts us to the possibility of something bad happening, and motivates us to come up with solutions to avoid bad outcomes. However, worriers often find it difficult to stop worrying because they attempt to solve problems that are not immediately solvable. So, during your worry time, the first thing to ask yourself is whether your worry involves a solvable problem or not.

3. If the problem is solvable...

Worriers also find it difficult to stop worrying because they keep trying to solve a problem to perfection. This is rarely possible. So, when you are trying to solve a problem, make sure that you aim to find a reasonable, rather than a perfect, solution. Worriers are very good at thinking of all the reasons why a possible solution would NOT work. They are not very good at thinking of any reason why a possible solution WOULD work. So, when you are trying to problem solve, make sure that you evaluate possible solutions in a more balanced way, not only paying attention to what may go wrong, but also to what may go right.

4. Be aware of unhelpful thoughts

One main reason why problems and solutions seem so bad is that when we worry, we tend to overestimate two things. First, we tend to overestimate how likely it is that bad things will happen. Second, we tend to overestimate how bad they would be, should they happen. Remind yourself of all the previous times when you worried about something that did not eventually happen. Try to become more realistic in your assessment of the likely outcomes. This does NOT mean being unreasonably positive. Just being more realistic.

5. Be your “best friend”

If you find it difficult to look at your negative thoughts objectively and challenge them to be more realistic, imagine that you are your own best friend. Think about all the negative things that you are thinking or saying to yourself: *“I’m such a loser. I never get anything right. I might as well give up now...”* And so on. If your best friend is saying these things about themselves, what would you say to them? How would you challenge their negativity and self-criticism? Now remind yourself to be your own best friend and challenge your own negative thinking the same way.

6. If the problem is not solvable...

Sometimes problems are not immediately solvable. During those times, it is important to use ‘emotionfocussed’, rather than ‘problem-focussed’ coping techniques. In other words, stop trying to solve something that is not solvable and learn to cope with it.

7. Use relaxation strategies

Because worry tends to be so pervasive, worriers often experience chronic irritability, muscle tension, concentration difficulties, sleep problems, indecision and agitation - as if being ‘on edge’ and unable to relax all the time. It is crucial therefore to make sure that occasionally you make a conscious effort to relax, even if for only a few minutes a day. There are a number of effective relaxation techniques, but physical exercise may be one of the best options.

8. Learn a special 'relaxation' technique: Mindfulness

A new technique that has been shown to be very useful to reduce worry and anxiety is 'mindfulness'. It is of course not new; it comes from very old Eastern meditative traditions. One of the main points of mindfulness is that one tries to pay attention to the present moment. In order to worry, your attention needs to be focussed on the future. If you successfully focus your attention on the present, you will find that your worrying stops. There are a number of good introductory books available on mindfulness that you may like to try.

9. Develop good sleeping habits

Worry tends to interfere with sleep. In fact, most people do most of their worrying at night, while trying to fall asleep. This is of course a very unhelpful habit, and may lead you to lie awake for hours, worrying about not being able to sleep! It is best to remind yourself to worry only during your 'worry time', and to use bedtime as your time for relaxation and recuperation.

10. Social support

Having a few friends to have fun with and to help you through difficult times is very important. Make sure you keep in touch and have 'time out'. However, it is also important to make sure that those times are not spent with you worrying and so not being able to enjoy yourself. Make sure you remind yourself of your 'worry time' and enjoy your 'non-worry time', paying attention to the present moment as much as possible.