



For better  
mental health

## How to... stop worrying



# How to... stop worrying

“I think of myself as a born worrier. I’ve always worried, ever since I was little. I’d worry about what people at school thought about me, and about homework and all sorts of things.”

“I worry so much that for my last birthday a friend bought me a plaque with the slogan ‘Worrying is like riding a rocking horse – it doesn’t get you anywhere’.”

“As a child, every night when I went to bed, I would worry about members of my family dying. I am not religious, but I ended up saying a prayer each night that was basically a list of my worries, which I asked God to take care of. This helped me to go to sleep. As I grew up, the list of worries became so long that I used to worry about going to bed. In the end, it was a worry off my mind when I stopped saying the prayer.”

**Almost everybody worries. It can be a healthy response to life, preventing us from being reckless, or stimulating us to do our best to take control of a situation. But some people worry a lot more than others, and sometimes to the point where it becomes a problem in itself.**

**This booklet is for anyone who feels that worrying is spoiling their lives. It explains the problem and how it may affect you. It also suggests ways you can tackle it.**



### **What is worrying?**

It means spending a lot of time thinking about bad things and being preoccupied with negative possibilities. The more you do it, the bigger your worries become. You may even find yourself worrying about all the time you've spent worrying.

There are many different types of worries. They include gloomy thoughts about what might happen in the future, about what is happening in the present, and about what is already in the past.

### **Fears for the future**

You might be concerned about things that very probably won't happen, as well as about things that might. So, you may be afraid of being involved in an accident, or developing a fatal illness, despite the fact that both are statistically unlikely. You may also be troubled by events or circumstances that you do have some control over. For instance, you could be overwhelmed by doubts about meeting a deadline, or passing an exam, because you haven't done enough work.

### **Present concerns**

Again, these can include feeling anxious about a situation you are powerless to change, but also about situations you can do something about. You could be distressed because you've been caught in traffic or your train has been delayed, although this is out of your hands. Or you could be worried about a persistent cough, despite knowing that a visit to your doctor might put your mind at ease.

### **Feelings about the past**

Once something has already happened, there's often nothing you can do to alter it. But you may continue to fret about whether you have failed your exam or made a dreadful mistake at work.

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## Why do we worry?

*"I think my worrying has a lot to do with my lack of confidence. Although it's hard to admit, it's often easier for me to worry about something than to do something about it. Over the years, I've learnt that the less time I give myself to worry, and the quicker I act, the better. I may feel ill before I make that phone call and shake a bit afterwards, but when it's over I feel so much better, having blasted a worry, however small, into oblivion."*

Worries are basically fears. Everyone gets scared, but we all handle fear in different ways. Sometimes, it's easier to dwell on a fear than to do something about it, or to accept that there is nothing to be done. Lack of confidence could be to blame. We may not believe that we are capable of taking action or handling a bad situation. If this is true of you, you might find Mind's booklet, *How to assert yourself* helpful. (For details of this and other publications mentioned here, see 'Further reading', on p. 14.)



## What effects can it have?

Your body reacts chemically to the fear that worrying can create. When you are scared, your body releases adrenalin. This is a result of the 'flight or fight' reflex that evolved to help us to overcome or run away from anything that threatened us physically. Adrenalin affects the digestive system, and can make you feel ill. The more you worry, the worse it gets, and a sudden rush of adrenalin can lead to butterflies in the stomach, a headache, or feeling very sick.

### **Sleeping problems**

It can become very difficult to get to sleep, because you feel worse at night. There are a number of reasons why. While you're trying to drop off to sleep, there's nothing to distract you from the worries that may have been lurking in the background during the day. It's then very easy to become anxious about missing your sleep, on top of everything else. It's also much easier for thoughts to get out of perspective at night, especially if you are on your own. Nor is it a practical time to do anything to fix whatever is on your mind. When you're already tired, you are likely to worry much more. (For more information, see *How to cope with sleep problems*.)

### **Losing your self-confidence**

The more problems you think you have, the less able you may feel to cope with them, and this can increase your sense of helplessness. This reduces your confidence, making you more vulnerable to your fears.

If you lack self-confidence, it may affect how other people relate to you, and how you feel in response. In this way, a negative spiral is set up. Some people experience panic attacks as a result of the build up of these feelings. (See 'Useful organisations', on p. 13, and Mind's booklet *How to cope with panic attacks*.)

### **Unhelpful strategies**

Under this kind of pressure, it may become very difficult for you to concentrate and carry on with everyday life, so that your problems tend to build up. It's emotionally draining to feel anxious all the time. It may feel as though your whole life is being taken over by it.

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In an attempt to get some control of this, people sometimes develop what is known as obsessional behaviour. For example, this could mean checking they've locked the door, not once but many times, before they are able to leave. Other people develop eating disorders, in trying to keep control of their anxiety. (See Mind's booklets, *Understanding obsessive-compulsive disorder* and *Understanding eating distress*.)



### Is worrying ever helpful?

*"Many people think it's a complete waste of time. Personally, I don't think that's true. It seems to me that if I worry and think about the worst that could possibly happen, the outcome is rarely as bad as I've imagined."*

### A spur to action

Sometimes, our fears make us act, and this can be very positive. Something is niggling at you, and even though you keep trying to ignore it, it keeps bringing itself to your attention. Perhaps you have a mole on your skin that is troubling you. This puts you under pressure until, finally, it forces you to visit the doctor and get treatment. Worrying about the worst that can happen can also help you to prepare for it, and to deal constructively with whatever eventually takes place.

### Improving performance

The adrenalin that is released can also give you the extra edge you need to succeed, when competing with others. But if you become too tense, it could mean you feel too ill to do your best.

### When to do something

Having the occasional nagging feeling is not the same as feeling worried each and every day. You may have a number of different things on your mind, or one overriding concern that seems to dominate your whole life. At this level, it can make you too anxious to think or act in a useful way. This is when worrying itself has become a problem that needs tackling.

### How can I stop myself?

*"When I was a child, my mum really helped with my worrying. She would notice when I was quiet and when I couldn't eat because of the butterflies in my stomach and she'd take me to one side. She'd ask me what was wrong and, suddenly, facing the worries with someone else really helped. She could help me to see which ones didn't matter and what I could do about others."*



### Confronting your fears

There's often a fear of the unknown, and trying to define that fear can help you to overcome it. By facing whatever it is, you may find you know what to do about the situation. You can begin to think about how you might cope with it, what you can do, and who might help you, if necessary.

### Talking it over

Discussing things with others can help to throw up a possible course of action or solution, which you wouldn't have been able to formulate on your own. For someone with a religious faith, talking to a minister could help you sort out an answer.

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You may feel the need to talk things over with someone who is not directly involved in your life. Talking to a psychotherapist or counsellor could help you arrive at a better understanding of your worries and their effects, and will support you in doing something about them. Cognitive behaviour therapy is a practical approach, which looks at the way in which our thought processes affect our lives and cause problems. It teaches you techniques for identifying and altering unhelpful patterns of thought.

If you think you might be interested in any form of talking treatment, ask your GP if he or she can refer you. Or get in touch with one of the organisations listed on p. 13. (See 'Further reading', on p. 14, for more information about the different kinds of therapy available.)

### Writing a list

Try writing a list of what's troubling you. Use statements, rather than questions. Instead of, 'What will happen if I don't get there on time?' say, 'I am worried that I won't get there on time'. This focuses on precisely what the fear is.

People often become stirred up about events that are quite improbable. You may find it difficult to appreciate just how unlikely something is when you are preoccupied with it. It might be a good idea to keep your list for a few weeks, and then refer back to it. You may find that you can cross some things off, because the events you were dreading so much didn't happen, or because they have shrunk to insignificance. Of course, you may feel that a whole new batch has arrived to replace it, but if you keep writing and going back to the list, you may be reassured that worries do just dissolve. Some people find it helps to tear up, burn or destroy their list.



Another constructive way to put your fears into perspective is to try writing down the reasons why something bad might not happen. This may help you to see more realistically which situations are worth worrying about and which are not.

### **Taking action**

There is often something you can do about a situation you feel anxious about. Consider each preoccupying thought, one by one, and then decide whether there is something that could be done about it. Make a list of possible solutions for each worry, with whatever is the most pressing worry at the top.

Then start to work your way through the list of actions, taking each task, one at a time. Cross each one off the list as you complete it, to reflect the fact that you have taken positive action and dealt with it. If you're not sure about the best action to take, list each option, together with its advantages and disadvantages. As well as helping you to make a decision, this could make you feel more confident about what you decide.

### **Asserting yourself**

You may feel that there is something that you could do about a particular source of anxiety, if you were confident enough. In this instance, assertiveness classes may help. Check out the internet, ask at your local library or look in your local paper for classes nearby.

### **Being in control**

Confine your problems to a certain time and place. For this to work, it's important to be strict, and not to let them intrude on your thoughts at other times. It might be helpful to visualise a box to place them in, which you may open at a later date or time. Some people set aside something like 30 minutes a day for worrying, taking the phrase 'I'll worry about it later' literally. It's a good idea to stick to the same time and place each day.

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### Relaxation and visualisation

Relaxation exercises often focus on replacing negative thoughts with positive ones. This could involve imagining yourself in a pleasant setting, such as a beach, a nice room or a garden. You could visualise your worries as physical objects that can be discarded, such as stones or rocks you could heave into the distance.

Sometimes, doing a relaxation exercise makes people feel quite uncomfortable. You might feel that it's not working, or that you're doing it wrong. It's best to take the attitude that you're just giving it a go, and that these negative thoughts are normal. Surprisingly, learning to relax takes practice. (See *The Mind guide to relaxation*.)

When you are about to go into a situation that alarms you, such as a doctor's appointment or a job interview, focus on something other than what's at hand. Pick up a good book, or listen to a personal stereo. If you feel anxious thoughts taking hold, distract yourself by looking at other people and imagining their lives, or by examining your surroundings in minute detail.

### Physical activity

Exercise is excellent because it can change the focus from your mind to your body. It relieves tension and uses up adrenalin. You don't have to go for a long run, or visit the gym. A good, steady walk can be just as effective, and is good for the heart as well as the head. Regular exercise, preferably for half-an-hour, three times a week, is known to improve mood and increase people's sense of wellbeing. Beads and stress toys are easy-to-carry tension-releasers, which also make a good distraction.

### **Improving your diet**

It's a good idea to cut down on caffeine, which is found not only in tea and coffee, but also in colas and other canned drinks. They contain stimulants that can heighten the physical effects of tension, such as headaches and stomach problems.

Eating well and regularly may also have a very beneficial effect, because unstable blood sugar levels can lead to jittery feelings that contribute to your state of mind. Avoid alcohol or smoking, which both affect mood. (See *The Mind guide to food and mood*.)

### **Complementary therapies**

A growing number of people now treat themselves with alternative medicine, such as herbal remedies, Bach flower remedies, homeopathy and traditional Chinese medicines, some of which are available over the counter at high street chemists. Part of the reason for their popularity is that they allow people control over their own treatment. They are also seen as more natural and perhaps safer than orthodox medicine. However, these remedies can be powerful and are not necessarily free of side effects.

It's always wise to consult a qualified practitioner, who can look at you as a whole person, not just at your symptoms, and who can supervise your treatment. (See 'Useful organisations' on p. 13.)

There are a number of physical therapies that are also available from alternative practitioners, including acupuncture, reflexology and aromatherapy. Yoga, massage, meditation and relaxation classes can help you to unwind, and teach you how to relax your muscles and breathe more deeply.

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This counteracts the shallow breathing and rapid heartbeat that often occur when doubts take hold, and which sometimes contribute to panic attacks.

### Medication

If extreme worrying turns into a state of continuous anxiety, your GP may prescribe antidepressants or minor tranquillisers. These should only be used for the briefest possible time, because they may have side effects and can be addictive. They can do nothing to change the root cause of your problem, but they can help you over the worst of a crisis until a different form of help, such as counselling or psychotherapy, can be put in place. (See *Understanding anxiety*, *Making sense of antidepressants* and *Making sense of sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers*, details under 'Further reading', on p. 14.)

## **Useful organisations**

### **Mind**

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) or Mindinfoline on 0845 766 0163.

### **British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)**

tel. 0161 705 4304, web: [www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com)

Can provide details of accredited therapists. Full directory of psychotherapists available online

### **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)**

tel. 01455 883 300, web: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

See their website for a list of practitioners in your area

### **First Steps to Freedom**

helpline: 0845 120 2916, web: [www.first-steps.org](http://www.first-steps.org)

Charity helping those with anxiety disorders

### **The Institute for Complementary and Natural Medicine (ICM)**

tel. 020 7922 7980, web: [www.i-c-m.org.uk](http://www.i-c-m.org.uk)

Provides information on complementary medicine

### **No Panic**

helpline: 0808 808 0545, web: [www.nopanic.org.uk](http://www.nopanic.org.uk)

Helpline for people experiencing anxiety disorders

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## Further reading

- ☐ *How to assert yourself* (Mind 2010) £1
- ☐ *How to cope with exam stress* (Mind 2009) £1
- ☐ *How to cope with panic attacks* (Mind 2008) £1
- ☐ *How to cope with sleep problems* (Mind 2008) £1
- ☐ *How to improve your mental wellbeing* (Mind 2007) £1
- ☐ *How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2007) £1
- ☐ *Making sense of antidepressants* (Mind 2008) £2.50
- ☐ *Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy* (Mind 2009) £2.50
- ☐ *Making sense of counselling* (Mind 2010) £2.50
- ☐ *Making sense of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy* (Mind 2004) £2.50
- ☐ *Making sense of sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers* (Mind 2010) £2.50
- ☐ *The Mind guide to food and mood* (Mind 2008) £1
- ☐ *The Mind guide to managing stress* (Mind 2009) £1
- ☐ *The Mind guide to massage* (Mind 2004) £1
- ☐ *The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2008) £1
- ☐ *The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2009) £1
- ☐ *Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2009) £1
- ☐ *Understanding eating distress* (Mind 2007) £1
- ☐ *Understanding obsessive compulsive disorder* (Mind 2008) £1
- ☐ *Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2009) £1

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## Mind's mission

- Our vision is of a society that promotes and protects good mental health for all, and that treats people with experience of mental distress fairly, positively, and with respect.
- The needs and experiences of people with mental distress drive our work and we make sure their voice is heard by those who influence change.
- Our independence gives us the freedom to stand up and speak out on the real issues that affect daily lives.
- We provide information and support, campaign to improve policy and attitudes and, in partnership with independent local Mind associations, develop local services.
- We do all this to make it possible for people who experience mental distress to live full lives, and play their full part in society.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, MindinfoLine: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.00am to 5.00pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, MindinfoLine has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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Mind (National Association for Mental Health)

15-19 Broadway

London E15 4BQ

tel. 020 8519 2122

fax: 020 8522 1725

web: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)



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