

## ANXIETY

# How to Stop Worrying and End Anxious Thoughts

Are you plagued by constant worries, fears, and anxious thoughts, especially about things you can't control? These tips can help calm your worried mind, ease anxiety, and end negative thinking.

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## The effects of worry and anxious thoughts

Worries, doubts, and anxieties are a normal part of life. It's natural to worry about an unpaid bill, an upcoming job interview, or a first date. But "normal" worry becomes excessive when it's persistent and uncontrollable. You worry every day about "what ifs" and worst-case scenarios, you can't get anxious thoughts out of your head, and it interferes with your daily life.

Constant worrying, negative thinking, and always expecting the worst can take a toll on your emotional and physical health. It can sap your emotional strength, leave you feeling restless and jumpy, cause insomnia, headaches, stomach problems, and muscle tension, and make it difficult to concentrate at work or school.

You may take your negative feelings out on the people closest to you, [self-medicate with alcohol or drugs](#), or try to distract yourself by zoning out in front of screens. Chronic worrying can also be a major symptom of [Generalized Anxiety Disorder \(GAD\)](#), a common anxiety disorder that involves tension, nervousness, and a general feeling of unease that colors your whole life.

If you're plagued by exaggerated worry and tension, there are steps you can take to turn off anxious thoughts. 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 balanced, less fearful perspective.

## Why is it so hard to stop worrying?

Constant worrying can keep you up at night and make you tense and edgy during the day. And even though you hate feeling like a nervous wreck, it can still be so difficult to stop. For most chronic worriers, the anxious thoughts are fueled by the beliefs—both negative and positive—that you hold about worrying:

## Negative beliefs about worry

You may believe that your constant worrying is harmful, that it's going to drive you crazy or affect your physical health. Or you may worry that you're going to lose all control over your worrying—that it will take over and never stop.

While negative beliefs, or worrying about worrying, adds to your anxiety and keeps worry going, positive beliefs about worrying can be just as damaging.

## Positive beliefs about worry

You may believe that your worrying helps you avoid bad things, prevents problems, prepares you for the worst, or leads to solutions. Maybe you tell yourself that if you keep worrying about a problem long enough, you'll eventually be able to figure it out? Or perhaps you're convinced that worrying is a responsible thing to do or the only way to ensure you don't overlook something?

It's tough to break the worry habit if you believe that your worrying serves a positive purpose. Once you realize that worrying is the problem, not the solution, you can regain control of your worried mind.

## How to stop worrying tip 1: Create a daily “worry” period

It's tough to be productive in your daily activities when anxiety and worry are dominating your thoughts and distracting you from work, school, or your home life. This is where the strategy of postponing worrying can help.

Telling yourself to stop worrying doesn't work. In fact, trying to do so often makes your worries stronger and more persistent. This is because trying to “thought stop” forces you to pay extra attention to the very thought you want to avoid.

But that doesn't mean there's nothing you can do to control worry. You just need a different approach. This is where the strategy of postponing worrying comes in. Rather than trying to stop or get rid of an anxious thought, give yourself permission to have it, but put off dwelling on it until later.

- 01. Create a “worry period.”** Choose a set time and place for worrying. It should be the same every day (e.g. in the living room from 5:00 to 5:20 p.m.) and early enough that it won't make you anxious right before bedtime. During your worry period, you're allowed to worry about whatever's on your mind. The rest of the day, however, is a worry-free zone.
- 02. Write down your worries.** If an anxious thought or worry comes into your head during the day, make a brief note of it and then continue about your day. Remind yourself that you'll have time to think about it later, so there's no need to worry about it right now. Also, writing down your thoughts—on a pad or on your phone or computer—is much harder work than simply thinking them, so your worries are more likely to lose their power.
- 03. Go over your “worry list” during the worry period.** If the thoughts you wrote down are still bothering you, allow yourself to worry about them, but only for the amount of time you've specified for your worry

period. As you examine your worries in this way, you'll often find it easier to develop a more balanced perspective. And if your worries don't seem important any more, simply cut your worry period short and enjoy the rest of your day.

Postponing worrying is effective because it breaks the habit of dwelling on worries when you've got other things to do, yet there's no struggle to suppress the thought or judge it. You simply save it for later. And as you develop the ability to postpone your anxious thoughts, you'll start to realize that you have more control than you think.

## Tip 2: Challenge anxious thoughts

If you suffer from chronic anxiety and worry, chances are you look at the world in ways that make it seem more threatening 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 anxious thought as if it were 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.

### Cognitive distortions that add to worry, anxiety, and stress include:

**All-or-nothing thinking.** Looking at things in black-or-white categories, with no middle ground. "If everything is not perfect, I'm a total failure."

**Overgeneralization.** Generalizing from a single negative experience, expecting it to hold true forever. "I didn't get hired for the job. I'll never get any job."

**The mental filter.** Focusing on the negatives while filtering out the positives. Noticing the one thing that went wrong, rather than all the things that went right. "I got the last question on the test wrong. I'm an idiot."

**Diminishing the positive.** Coming up with reasons why positive events don't count. "I did well on the presentation, but that was just dumb luck."

**Jumping to conclusions.** Making negative interpretations without actual evidence. You act like a mind reader: "I can tell she secretly hates me." Or a fortune teller: "I just know something terrible is going to happen."

**Catastrophizing.** Expecting the worst-case scenario to happen. "The pilot said we're in for some turbulence. The plane's going to crash!"

**Emotional reasoning.** Believing that the way you feel reflects reality. "I feel like such a fool. Everyone must be laughing at me."

**'Shoulds' and 'should-nots.'** Holding yourself to a strict list of what you should and shouldn't do and beating yourself up if you break any of the rules. "I should never have tried starting a conversation with her. I'm such a moron."

**Labeling.** Criticizing yourself based on mistakes and perceived shortcomings. "I'm a failure; I'm boring; I deserve to be alone."

**Personalization.** Assuming responsibility for things that are outside your control. "It's my fault my son got in an accident. I should have warned him to drive carefully in the rain."

## How to challenge these thoughts

In order to break these bad thinking habits and stop the worry and anxiety they bring, you need to retrain your brain. Once you identify the negative thoughts, instead of viewing them as facts, treat them as hypotheses you're testing out. As you examine and challenge your worries and anxious thoughts, you'll develop a more balanced perspective.

During your worry period, challenge your negative thoughts by asking yourself:

- ➔ 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?

## Tip 3: Ask yourself if a worry is something you can control

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.

## Is your worry something you can control?

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

- ➔ 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, uncontrollable worries** are those for which there is no corresponding action. "What if I get cancer someday?" or "What if my kid gets into an accident?"

## If the worry is in your control, 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 to a worry. 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 anxious.

## If the worry is NOT in your control, accept the uncertainty

If you're a chronic worrier, the vast majority of your anxious thoughts probably fall in this camp. Worrying is often a way we try to predict what the future has in store—a way to prevent unpleasant surprises and control the outcome. The problem is, it doesn't work.

Thinking about all the things that could go wrong doesn't make life any more predictable. You may feel safer when you're worrying, but it's just an illusion. Focusing on worst-case scenarios will only keep you from enjoying the good things you have in the present. To stop worrying, you need to learn how to embrace the uncertainty that we all face in life.

[\[Read: Dealing with Uncertainty\]](#)

**Tackle your need for immediate answers.** Do you tend to predict bad things will happen just because they are uncertain? What is the likelihood they will? Given the likelihood is very low, is it possible to live with the small chance that something negative may happen?

**Discover how others cope with uncertainty.** Ask your friends and family how they cope with uncertainty in specific situations. Could you do the same? For example, if you're worried about your child taking the bus to school, asking a neighbor how they deal with the uncertainty could help you feel less anxious.

**Tune into your emotions.** Worrying about uncertainty is often a way to avoid unpleasant 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!"

By using HelpGuide's free [Emotional Intelligence Toolkit](#), you can tune into your emotions and start to accept your feelings, even those that are uncomfortable or don't make sense.

## Tip 4: Interrupt the cycle of worry and stress

If you worry excessively, it can seem like negative thoughts are running through your head on endless repeat. You may feel like you're spiraling out of control, going crazy, or about to burn out under the weight of all this anxiety.

But there are steps you can take right now to interrupt all those anxious thoughts, lower your stress, and give yourself a time out from relentless worrying.

**Get up and get moving.** [Exercise is a natural and effective anti-anxiety treatment](#) because it releases endorphins which relieve tension and stress, boost energy, and enhance your sense of well-being. Even more importantly, by really focusing on how your body feels as you move, you can interrupt the constant flow of worries running through your head.

Pay attention to the sensation of your feet hitting the ground as you walk, run, or dance, for example, or the rhythm of your breathing, or the feeling of the sun or wind on your skin.

**Take a yoga or tai chi class.** By focusing your mind on your movements and breathing, practicing yoga or tai chi keeps your attention on the present, helping to clear your mind and lead to a relaxed state.

**Meditate.** Meditation works by switching your focus from worrying about the future or dwelling on the past to what's happening right now. By being fully engaged in the present moment, you can interrupt the endless loop of negative thoughts and worries.

You don't need to sit cross-legged, light candles or incense, or chant. Simply find a quiet, comfortable place and choose one of our [free audio meditations](#) that can guide you through the meditation process.

**Practice progressive muscle relaxation.** This can help you break the endless loop of worrying by focusing your mind on your body instead of your thoughts. By alternately [tensing and then releasing](#) different muscle groups in your body, you release muscle tension in your body. And as your body relaxes, your mind will follow.

**Try deep breathing.** When you worry, you become anxious and breathe faster, often leading to further anxiety. But by practicing [deep breathing exercises](#), you can calm your mind and quiet negative thoughts.

## Relaxation techniques can change the brain

While the above [relaxation techniques](#) can provide some immediate respite from worry and anxiety, practicing them regularly can also change your brain. Research has shown that regular [meditation](#), for example, can boost activity on the left side of the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for feelings of serenity and joy.

The more you practice, the greater the anxiety relief you'll experience and the more control you'll start to feel over your anxious thoughts and worries.

## Tip 5: Talk about your worries

It may seem like a simplistic solution, but talking face to face with a trusted friend or family member—someone who will listen to you without judging, criticizing, or continually being distracted—is one of the most effective ways to calm your nervous system and diffuse anxiety. When your worries start spiraling, talking them over can make them seem far less threatening.

Keeping worries to yourself only causes them to build up until they seem overwhelming. But saying them out loud can often help you to make sense of what you're feeling and put things in perspective. If your fears are unwarranted, verbalizing them can expose them for what they are—needless worries. And if your fears are justified, sharing them with someone else can produce solutions that you may not have thought of alone.

**Build a strong support system.** Human beings are social creatures. We're not meant to live in isolation. But a strong support system doesn't necessarily mean a vast network of friends. Don't underestimate the benefit of a few people you can trust and count on to be there for you. And if you don't feel that you have anyone to confide in, it's never too late to [build new friendships](#).

**Know who to avoid when you're feeling anxious.** Your anxious take on life may be something you learned when you were growing up. If your mother is a chronic worrier, she is not the best person to call when you're feeling anxious—no matter how close you are. When considering who to turn to, ask yourself whether you tend to feel better or worse after talking to that person about a problem.

## Try volunteering

[Volunteering](#) helps counteract the effects of stress, anger, and anxiety. The social contact aspect of helping and working with others can have a profound effect on your overall psychological well-being.

Nothing relieves stress better than a meaningful connection to another person. [Working with pets](#) and other animals has also been shown to improve mood and reduce stress and anxiety.

## Tip 6: Practice mindfulness

Worrying is usually focused on the future—on what might happen and what you'll do about it—or on the past, rehashing the things you've said or done. The centuries-old practice of mindfulness can help you break free of your worries by bringing your attention back to the present.

This strategy is based on observing your worries and then letting them go, helping you identify where your thinking is causing problems and getting in touch with your emotions.

**Acknowledge and observe your worries.** Don't try to ignore, fight, or control them like you usually would. Instead, simply observe them as if from an outsider's perspective, without reacting or judging.

**Let your worries go.** Notice that when you don't try to control the anxious thoughts that pop up, they soon pass, like clouds moving across the sky. It's only when you engage your worries that you get stuck.

**Stay focused on the present.** Pay attention to the way your body feels, the rhythm of your breathing, your ever-changing emotions, and the thoughts that drift across your mind. If you find yourself getting stuck on a particular thought, bring your attention back to the present moment.

**Repeat daily.** Using mindfulness to stay focused on the present is a simple concept, but it takes time and regular practice to reap the benefits. At first, you'll probably find that your mind keeps wandering back to your worries. Try not to get frustrated. Each time you draw your focus back to the present, you're reinforcing a new mental habit that will help you break free of the negative worry cycle.

## Basic mindfulness meditation

- ➔ Find a quiet place
- ➔ Sit on a comfortable chair or cushion, with your back straight, and your hands resting on the tops of your upper legs.
- ➔ Close your eyes and breathe in through your nose, allowing the air downward into your lower belly. Let your abdomen expand fully.
- ➔ Breathe out through your mouth.
- ➔ Focus on an aspect of your breathing, such as the sensations of air flowing into your nostrils and out of your mouth, or your belly rising and falling as you inhale and exhale.
- ➔ If your mind starts to wander, return your focus to your breathing with no judgment.
- ➔ Try to meditate 3 or 4 times per week for 10 minutes per day. Every minute counts.

[\[Listen: Mindful Breathing Meditation\]](#)



## Support resources

### Support in the U.S.

[NAMI Helpline](#) – Trained volunteers can provide information, referrals, and support for those suffering from anxiety disorders in the U.S. Call 1-800-950-6264. (National Alliance on Mental Illness)

[Find a Therapist](#) – Search for anxiety disorder treatment providers in the U.S. (Anxiety Disorders Association of America)

### Support in other countries

[Support Groups](#) – List of support groups in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and South Africa. (Anxiety and Depression Association of America)

[Anxiety UK](#) – Information, support, and a dedicated helpline for UK sufferers and their families. Call: 03444 775 774. (Anxiety UK)

[Anxiety Canada](#) – Provides links to services in different Canadian provinces. (Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada)

[SANE Help Centre](#) – Provides information about symptoms, treatments, medications, and where to go for support in Australia. Call: 1800 18 7263. (SANE Australia).

[Helpline \(India\)](#) – Provides information and support to those with mental health concerns in India. Call: 1860 2662 345 or 1800 2333 330.

## More Information

### Helpful links

01. [Anxiety](#) - Worksheet to help you cope with anxiety and worry. (Centre for Clinical Interventions)

02. [Anxiety and Stress Disorders](#) - Special health report from Harvard Medical School. (Harvard Health Publishing)

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