**Stop worrying and keep heart disease at bay**

July 2, 2016 10:00pm

ROSIE KING

THE term “worry wart” is often bandied about in jest. But if you’re among the 31 per cent of the Australian workforce in a constant state of distress, you’ll know that being a worry wart isn’t funny.

What you might not know, though, is that relentless fretting can throw your inner and outer health into turmoil — and then you’ll have even more to stress about.

Introducing “the worried well”.

These make up a group of people who are otherwise healthy but experience consistent high levels of worry. And a three-year Australian study of employees has shown for 81 per cent of them, intense work environments are to blame.

“As a population, we’re generally well, certainly psychologically-speaking,” says Stuart Taylor, resilience expert and managing partner at The Resilience Institute, Australia.

“But when you look at the amount of time people spend worrying about the future, it’s significant and it’s having serious ramifications on our health.

“The scariest part, too, is that it’s getting worse, not better.”

So, what exactly is worry?

“It’s a step beyond stress,” Taylor explains.

“Stress is usually in the moment, whereas worry is a lower level but longer-term concern. It can come from uncertainty about meeting financial goals, paying a mortgage, finding a partner, having another baby — it tends to centre around something on the horizon that brings an underlying sense of concern.”

The key markers for being a member of the worried well are poor sleep patterns, feeling pressure to be perfect, fear of failure, moodiness and falling ill whenever you take your foot off the pedal.

Extreme worry affects you on the inside by causing the body to produce excess cortisol, the stress hormone which suppresses the immune system and opens the door for a whole range of illnesses, including heart disease and high blood pressure.

“Worry is the tipping point for entry into a downward spiral, so mental illness is one of the fallouts of staying in this space for too long,” Taylor says.

“Worry becomes distress and from there it heads towards depression. Worry is usually introspective and can be incredibly isolating, which is part of the danger because we lose our ability to connect.”

The answer, Taylor says, is to learn how to bounce back from stressful situations by becoming more resilient and then keeping a sense of perspective.

“Worry is in our hands and knowing you can take control is important,” he says.

“Building resilience helps. That means focusing on courage, connection and creativity so you’re playing to your strengths and doing things you enjoy.

“In other words, you’re thriving. When you thrive, worry isn’t even in the equation.”