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I'm a Therapist Who Journaled With the Worry Watch App to Conquer My Anxiety

Worry Watch provides CBT-based exercises and resources to help with anxiety

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I have a full-time clinical practice as a licensed psychologist; I also struggle with anxiety. Although I am not a purist in my therapeutic approach (I pull from a variety of approaches rather than one exclusively), I use many tips and tools from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT is an approach to treatment that involves learning to identify the interactions between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and adjust harmful or inaccurate thought patterns to improve mental health. Extensive research over the past few decades has consistently shown that CBT can help reduce symptoms of clinical anxiety.

In recent years, there has been a rise in mental health apps aimed at helping people who struggle with anxiety. Many of these apps base their interventions on cognitive behavioral techniques and theories, but their quality varies. Worry Watch is one such app—it uses cognitive behavioral techniques to reduce anxiety symptoms.

In the month that I tested the app, I found its tools simple yet effective in helping me be more conscious of my thoughts and worries. Here's how my experience using it went.

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My First Impressions of Worry Watch

I was not familiar with Worry Watch before I signed up. However, upon downloading the app, I saw it is a guided journal designed to help users recognize and respond to anxious thoughts.

While the tools in Worry Watch are similar to other CBT tools I have used with clients, the app developers are not mental health professionals. I could not find information on its website indicating the developers consulted qualified professionals in developing Worry Watch either, which was a red flag.

How Much Worry Watch Costs

I could access some features without purchasing the paid version of Worry Watch, but these features are limited. For example, I could not input more than one journal entry per day without unlocking the paid version. However, I could purchase a one-year subscription for only $11.99, so it is an affordable option compared to other similar apps—for example, one month of Headspace costs $12.99.

Worry Watch includes a guided journal with follow-up prompts to entries, info on coping skills for anxiety, a daily mood tracker, and affirmations aimed at reinforcing positive thought patterns.

My Feelings About Worry Watch's Privacy Policy

After I downloaded Worry Watch, I read its privacy policy. In today's world, we often click "I agree" without reading the terms and conditions because who has time to read a 20-page legal document every time we download a new app? At the same time, since so many tech companies store, use, and sell user data, I always check the privacy policies of apps that I review.

According to Worry Watch's privacy policy, "The Application Provider does NOT have access to your App Data. … Licensed Application may collect non-personal information such as your device type, device identifier, operating system, language preferences, and time zone to determine the Licensed Application program logic and to improve the Licensed Application. It does NOT collect the precise location information of your mobile device."

Data Tracking

In other words, Worry Watch will determine what device you are using and your primary language, but it does not track specific information, monitor your location, or collect identifiable data about you.

The Privacy Policy also allows users to delete all data they enter into the app, and states that app developers do not have access to users' passcodes or information they input into the app.

Most mental health apps I have used reserve the right to collect additional information about specific users, and they often indicate that data may be shared or sold to third parties. I appreciated Worry Watch's commitment to my privacy, especially since the app cues you to share deeply personal information about your life, mental health, and moods.

How I Used Worry Watch

Upon opening Worry Watch, I was greeted with the Journal feature. I could use this feature to input my thoughts on things happening during my day, with a title and notes. With each entry, I was prompted to rank my current anxiety on a three-point scale. The scale was not labeled, but it appeared to indicate low, moderate, or high anxiety. I could save my entry as is, or I could add a "reason" to the entry. A reason is a trigger or cause for anxiety, and the prompt was a text box where I could include any narrative or bulleted information.

This feature allowed me to add context for the anxiety trigger, whether the worry-inducing scenario was hypothetical, real, or unknown, and a list of cognitive distortions (or "biases") that might impact my reasoning. Biases include things like "All or nothing: thinking in extremes," "Labeling: judging/jumping to conclusions," and "Mind reading: assuming you know what others think." Basically, this feature helped bring my attention to possible errors in my thinking.

> Worry Watch saved my journal entries and then offered me the opportunity to submit a response.

This section encouraged me to note what steps I took to alleviate my anxiety and any additional thoughts that came up for me. I could then reflect on the experience and whether or not a skill I used was helpful in an open narrative format. The app asked, "Was the outcome as bad as worried?" to which I could respond "yes," "no," or "awaiting."

> **"**
> After completing the journal regularly, I started to notice patterns in my thinking and learn about ways that my thoughts were contributing to anxious distress."

The cognitive distortions list brought my attention to how I might be reacting to a bias rather than the reality of the situation. At the same time, there was always the option to indicate that yes, the outcome was as bad as anticipated, so the app does not force toxic positivity or invalidate objectively bad scenarios.

Toxic Positivity

Toxic positivity refers to feeling pressured or forced to focus on the positive to the point that we refuse to acknowledge real, negative feelings.

The attitude of "Good vibes only" can invalidate difficulties and cause people to ignore the challenges they need to face. Some cognitive behavioral interventions can cause toxic positivity by challenging all negative thoughts, so it is important to ensure we take a balanced approach as Worry Watch does.

Coping Tools

Next to the journal is a tab labeled "Cope." The first coping resource was a breathing exercise, which I could fully customize to indicate how many seconds I wanted to inhale and exhale and whether I wanted to hold my breath between breaths.

I input the length for each breath and how many breaths I wanted to take and then pressed play. The app then talked me through each breath to help me slow down, center myself, and focus on my breathing.

Next, I could complete a grounding exercise, with the app prompting me to describe things I could see, touch, hear, smell, and taste.

> **This technique helped bring my focus to the present moment and my environment by talking me through my five senses."**

All coping skills had customization options so I could choose if I wanted music and/or chimes to play in the background.

Meditations

The third tab included a guided imagery meditation, which I could set for anywhere from 10 to 60 minutes. It talked me through calming my body and becoming present in the moment, then talked me through a visualization of a safe place where I felt comfortable and happy. Although the activity is described as a visualization, it also talked me through different senses, including what I could hear, feel, and smell in the space.

Finally, there was one guided meditation, which could be between 10 to 60 minutes long. This meditation was similar to the visualization, with the same musical background and call to settle into the moment. Rather than a visualization, it brought my attention to my internal processes and current physical and mental state.

The guided meditations are not narrated by a human but rather by a robot. This took me out of the meditation somewhat because I was very aware that I was not listening to a real person.

Affirmations

The final tab, labeled "Reinforce," provides positive affirmations I could read and focus on. These included inspirational quotes, general affirmations, simple strategies for anxiety management (such as "Identify the controllable" and "Focus on the present moment"), and positive idioms. A tab labeled "Note" allowed me to create my own, personalized affirmations.

Other Features

I could prompt the app to notify me at certain times to check in, journal, or use a coping skill. With the paid version, there was no limit to how many times I could use the tools in the app.

Worry Watch's free version only allows users to input one journal entry at a time. While you can continue using the journal, you must delete the previous entry and thus cannot go back and review patterns. The coping skills and mood tracker are also behind the paywall, but affirmations are available in the free version.

Pros and Cons

Worry Watch has some fantastic resources for coping with anxiety and is based on evidence-based anxiety treatments; at the same time, I have some concerns about the app's development.

Pros

- Uses evidence-based strategies to reduce anxiety
- Can be used offline
- Free version available
- Paid version is affordable
- Does not collect or use your data
- Multiple coping tools are available
- Helpful guided journal

Cons

- Free version is very limited
- None of the developers are mental health professionals
- No specific research regarding Worry Watch's efficacy
- Robotic voice in the coping skills section

Final Thoughts

Worry Watch seems to be based on cognitive behavioral techniques, which have evidence to support that they're useful in reducing anxiety symptoms. However, there is no information about whether the development team consulted qualified professionals when creating the app.

> As a mental health professional, I am often frustrated by technology companies that create so-called mental health resources without consulting experts in the field."

Many assume they can easily understand and develop these resources without mental health training or knowledge. It would be like if I decided to open a dialysis clinic without completing medical training or talking to physicians. Those lacking the knowledge to create effective mental health resources risk harming users.

However, despite this issue, I was impressed with Worry Watch. The app has a handful of mindfulness-based coping skills for anxiety as well, which allowed me to try different skills without becoming overwhelmed by the number of options. I found the robot voice for the guided meditations distracting, but this approach might be fine for other users.

> I particularly liked that the breathing exercise and affirmations were fully customizable.

Overall, Worry Watch delivered on its promise to offer guided journaling and mindfulness-based coping skills for anxiety, with free and affordable paid options, although I am concerned that it was not developed with insight from experts. I would recommend it as a useful tool but encourage users to consult their treatment team and qualified providers to oversee their use of the app.

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2 Sources

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