



Book 10 Simple Solutions to Worry

How to Calm Your Mind, Relax Your Body & Reclaim Your Life

Kevin L. Gyoerkoe and Pamela S. Wiegartz
New Harbinger, 2006
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Recommendation

You can indeed be free of worry, even if achieving that goal is not quite as simple as the advice in Bobby McFerrin's 1988 chart-topping song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." Anxiety experts Kevin L. Gyoerkoe and Pamela S. Wiegartz explain their well-grounded approach to understanding worry and its impact on your life, including your health, relationships and productivity. Their upbeat little book packs a powerful one-two punch that illuminates and clarifies the basic elements of "productive" and "unproductive" worry, and then gives you specific directions for managing and even eliminating useless fretting from your life. Using "cognitive behavioral therapy" principles, exercises and techniques, you'll be able to identify and change the negative thoughts that cause worry and begin to lead a more stress-free, balanced life. *BooksInShort* recommends this small gem as a fine resource for working through your worries.

Take-Aways

- "Worry affects how you think, behave, feel and relate to others."
- The three basic elements of worrying are panicking about today's impact on the future, foreseeing a worst-case scenario and picturing the future using words without images.
- "Productive worry" focuses on a dilemma and lists steps toward a solution.
- "Unproductive worry" centers on an improbable event and does not lead to a plan.
- "Cognitive behavioral therapy" strategies can reduce anxiety and worry.
- To alleviate your symptoms, practice these techniques: muscle relaxation, deep breathing, meditation or "guided imagery."
- Use better time management and communication skills.
- Learn to change your thoughts, to react to new ways and to confront your worries.
- Consider taking prescription anti-anxiety medications, if only as a temporary aid.
- Monitor your headway by recording your worries and your progress in dismissing them. Commit to learning new tools and skills by signing a contract with yourself.

Summary

"10 Simple Solutions to Worry"

Do you suffer from chronic apprehension? Do you agonize over the smallest of molehills, creating large inhibiting mountains in your head? Don't sweat it. Here are 10 solutions how to manage your worry:

1. “Understand Worry”

Worry has three basic elements: The first is “future orientation.” Most people worry more about what might happen in the future as a result of today’s events than they do about the reality of the event at hand. For example, having a flat tire is trivial compared with worrying about what the repair might cost, missing a crucial meeting or having to cancel a dinner date. The second element of worry, “catastrophizing,” accelerates your fretful future orientation into a doomsday scenario, where you see the future in a “highly negative light.” Worry’s third element is “language-based thoughts.” Healthy, positive thinking includes both words and images, but when you worry, you switch to thinking in words alone. Your mind shuts out images – which may be scary – and lets your “inner voice” repeat drearily monotonous portents of future disaster.

“Worry affects how you think, behave, feel, and relate to others.”

Yet not all worry is bad. “Productive worry” spurs you to take positive action in matters crucial to your survival. Health concerns might spur you to quit smoking. Distress about paying your bills might prompt you to seek a raise or a better job. Productive worry involves a specific problem and a solution. In contrast, “unproductive worry” is fretting about a highly improbable event and produces no solution. Normal anxiety – the fight-or-flight response – helps you address problems, but unproductive worry can paralyze you.

“Some worry is a reality of life.”

Worry affects four aspects of your life:

1. **“Cognitive”** – Worrying leads to disastrous thinking about what could happen.
2. **“Behavioral”** – Anxiety precipitates “avoidance” and “compulsive behaviors.”
3. **“Physiological”** – Worry provokes stress, sleeplessness, tiredness and distractedness.
4. **“Interpersonal”** – Fretful folks shun intimacy. They’re querulous and self-absorbed.

“One of the fascinating things about self-monitoring is how it changes your behavior. When self-monitoring is applied to chronic worry, the result is often less worry.”

Starting today, you can understand, control and reduce unproductive worrying. Monitor yourself by recording what you worry about in a small notebook. Jot down the dates and times you find yourself stewing. Rank the bothersome subject on a scale of 1 to 10. Within a week, you should start to see patterns of your “core worries.” Most people fret primarily about “family, health, finances, relationships, work or school,” and “safety.”

2. “Make a Commitment”

Consistent practice can make managing your fretfulness second nature. To experience fewer and less-dramatic bouts of anxiety, commit to learning new tools and skills. Set realistic expectations, and write out reasonable goals. List the benefits of worrying, such as distracting yourself from unpleasant situations, feeding your superstitions, earning attention, controlling others or solving problems. Does thinking through niggling concerns help or hurt you? Then list the pros and cons of controlling anxious thoughts, so you can decide if learning to stop worrying is worth the effort. If you’re willing to commit the time and energy to quit worrying, sign a contract with yourself.

3. “Learn to Relax”

Uncontrolled worry can produce a range of physical troubles. Chronic worry throws your nervous system into a “constant state of arousal.” Achieving a state of deep relaxation – an effective antidote to anxiety – is a learned skill that takes practice and offers proven benefits for your physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral health. To derive the greatest benefit, practice one of the following four relaxation techniques for at least 20 to 30 minutes every day. Experiment to see which one works best for you. Don’t intentionally try to relax, or you’ll defeat your purpose.

1. **“Progressive muscle relaxation”** – For physical symptoms like tight muscles, headaches or sleeplessness, learn how to tense and release your muscles to make yourself relax.
2. **“Diaphragmatic breathing”** – For respiratory symptoms like a tight chest or a “lightheaded” feeling, learn to use deep breathing techniques.
3. **“Meditation”** – For cognitive symptoms like “racing thoughts, what-if scenarios” or “difficulty concentrating,” learn methods for sitting still and clearing your mind.
4. **“Guided imagery”** – Learn ways how to muster new and positive images to replace troubling mental depictions of negative scenarios like making a bad speech or crashing your car.

4. “Change Your Thinking”

Two “revolutionary” findings in the 1960s form the basis of modern-day “cognitive behavioral therapy” (CBT). First, researchers discovered that conscious (rather than unconscious) thoughts control how people feel. Then, they established that “those who suffer emotional distress often also engage in distorted thinking.” Some “common cognitive distortions” include seeing a small threat as overwhelming, viewing possible outcomes only in black and white, anticipating disaster, and engaging in “what-if thinking, mental filtering” and “overgeneralization.” Identify which distortions misshape your thoughts, and record them in your notebook. Counteract these mental distortions by assembling the facts about a possible event, anchoring yourself in the here and now, and conducting a “cost-benefit analysis” about specific worries. Continued practice will reduce your anxiety level.

5. “React Differently”

“Worry behaviors” are not real problem-solving devices. They don’t mitigate a dilemma. Their function as coping mechanisms is to make you feel better about being

concerned. Compulsively repeating a worrisome idea is just a temporary fix. An overanxious person might believe that worrying behavior prevents a disaster, but it does not. The act of routinely checking on a sleeping baby doesn't keep the infant safe, but the behavior becomes an automatic response to parental fretting. Repetitive checking is a common anxious behavior, along with "excessive conscientiousness, reassurance-seeking and avoidance." Eliminate fretful behaviors by listing them and analyzing whether they benefit you or not. See if you can stop cold turkey. Redirect negative thoughts and try to fill your extra time with fun.

6. "Accept Uncertainty"

Researchers cite "intolerance of uncertainty" as a prime component of worry. Uncertainty filters into all the small occurrences of everyday life, yet most people want certainty in at least a few areas, notably work, health and relationships. Worriers view uncertainty as bad and try to avoid it, though it is intrinsic to the human experience. If you fret about life's uncertainties, try to flip your viewpoint and to see it as responsible for all the excitement, joy and wonder that makes living interesting. Without uncertainty, life would be boring. List uncertainties you find uncomfortable, the ways you justify anxiety and any action you can take to develop a more positive approach.

7. "Manage Your Time"

Most people have periods when they have too much to do in too little time. Don't confront a time crunch by giving in to inefficiency, which can result in delays, anxiety and lost work. To feel more accomplished and less worried, improve your time management:

1. **Develop greater awareness** – In your notebook, create a detailed log of how you spend each 15-minute segment of every day for an entire week.
2. **Analyze how you spend your time** – Categorize your activities into logical groups such as eating, sleeping, housework, personal hygiene, childcare, commuting, working, recreation, and so on. Then add the amount of time you spent engaged in each category, making sure the total is 168 hours. Reflect on any changes you could make by consolidating, eliminating, delegating or even increasing certain activities.
3. **Make a time schedule** – Make another full week schedule, filling in each 15-minute segment with how you would like to spend the coming week. First, enter set appointments and commitments. Then allocate high-, medium- and low-priority tasks into the blank spaces, leaving room for contingencies.
4. **Assess how you did** – For at least one or two weeks use an extra column to monitor how closely you followed your plan. Pay close attention to whether you accomplished your high-priority tasks or fell into procrastination.

"Poor use of time leads to increased frustration, anxiety and worry. Time management training has been shown to reduce these negative feelings."

Problems with procrastination often stem from trying to do something too perfectly, being scared to do it wrong, spending more time stewing over it than actually working on it and feeling too responsible for its outcome. Overcome procrastination by diving in and taking action: Divide a job into smaller parts, examine your negative beliefs about failure, envision the completed job and share your goals with others while asking for their support.

8. "Communicate Assertively"

Suppressing your needs and desires can fuel increased anxiety and stress. Worriers may learn early in life that they have to subjugate their needs to others' priorities, to accept the dictate of someone in authority without question and to avoid making waves. Pay attention to how different styles of personal communication – "aggressive, passive" and "assertive" – can affect your levels of worry. Assertive communication engenders less anxiety. Assertiveness requires that you first define the situation, express your feelings about it, propose a solution, and outline both the positive and the negative consequences of compliance.

9. "Confront Your Worries"

If you fret all the time, people probably tell you to stop panicking. They say, "things will work out," or they urge you to "think positive thoughts." You know all too well that such suggestions are futile. In fact, the harder you try to stifle your troublesome thinking, the more those ideations intrude. Furthermore, attempts to push away unpleasant mental urges can be more harmful in the long run. Surprisingly, the best way to handle unpleasant fears and worries is to confront them by thinking intensely and purposely about them. This process uses "the magic of habituation" to desensitize your reactions to specific concerns. Directly confronting your apprehensions stops the negative cycle created by having an additional anxious response to the initial worry. Confront your worries by listing them and ranking them hierarchically. Choose the least anxiety-producing worry to focus on at length. Practice imagery and anxiety-management skills on that worry until it dissipates. Then tackle the next least-bothersome worry, and then the next.

10. "Know Your Medications"

Anti-anxiety prescription medicines offer benefits and drawbacks. Many people learn to manage their levels of trepidation without medication, simply by learning and practicing cognitive behavioral strategies. Others may feel too overwhelmed by worry and fear to practice these techniques effectively or simply may not have the time for formal relaxation exercises. The disadvantages of anti-anxiety drugs include possible negative interactions with other prescription medications. Discuss your situation in detail with your doctor, examine all your options, consider possible consequences and make an informed decision.

"Worriers tend to chain several worries together, leading to escalating anxiety."

Any knowledgeable, licensed medical doctor (not necessarily a CBT specialist) can prescribe useful treatments from a range of medication for generalized anxiety. Many patients turn to alternative or herbal remedies, but less is known about their efficacy, side effects and possible interactions with other drugs. Discuss all aspects of such a decision with your doctor.

Sustaining Your Momentum

Consistent, regular practice of these CBT strategies should reduce the frequency and intensity of your anxiety, but expect both victories and setbacks in your battle

against this challenging foe. Patience and persistence will help you manage your anxiety and ultimately gain the upper hand. To maintain your progress, try to practice your skills, look for early signs of new problems, decide whether these new concerns are productive or unproductive, and turn to the strategies that worked for you previously.

“Most people are skeptical when they hear that a good way to have fewer worries is to actually worry more on purpose.”

With deliberate action, it’s entirely possible to live a worry-free life.

About the Authors

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