Understanding worry

Why some minds worry more, and what keeps worry going.

Worry is a chain of "what if" thoughts about things that might go wrong. A little worry is useful: it helps us plan. Too much worry is exhausting. It jumps from topic to topic, is hard to stop, and rarely ends in a solution.

Signs that worry has become a problem

- [ ] I worry about lots of different things
- [ ] Once I start, it is hard to stop
- [ ] I feel tense, restless or on edge
- [ ] My sleep is affected
- [ ] I find it hard to concentrate
- [ ] I am tired and irritable

Why worry keeps going

It feels useful

"If I worry, I will be prepared." "Worrying shows I care." These beliefs make it hard to put worry down.

Uncertainty feels unbearable

Worry is an attempt to get certainty about the future. There is never enough, so the worrying carries on.

It becomes a worry itself

"I am going to make myself ill with all this worry." Worry about worry adds a second layer.

Avoiding and checking

Putting off decisions, over-preparing and seeking reassurance all give short relief and keep the habit strong.

What helps

- Sorting worries into those you can act on and those you cannot.
- Giving worry a set time and place, instead of all day.
- Practising small doses of uncertainty on purpose.
- Bringing attention back to what is in front of you.

Note

Worrying is something you do, even though it feels automatic. That means you can learn to do less of it.

My notes and questions

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Two kinds of worry

Sort your worries into practical problems and "what ifs".

Name _____ Date _____

Practical worries
About a real problem that exists now, and that you can do something about. "The car tax is due and I have not paid it." These need a plan.

Hypothetical worries
About things that have not happened and may never happen, or that are out of your hands. "What if I get ill next year?" These cannot be solved by thinking harder.

List what is on your mind. For each one, mark whether it is practical or hypothetical. If it is practical, what is the next step?

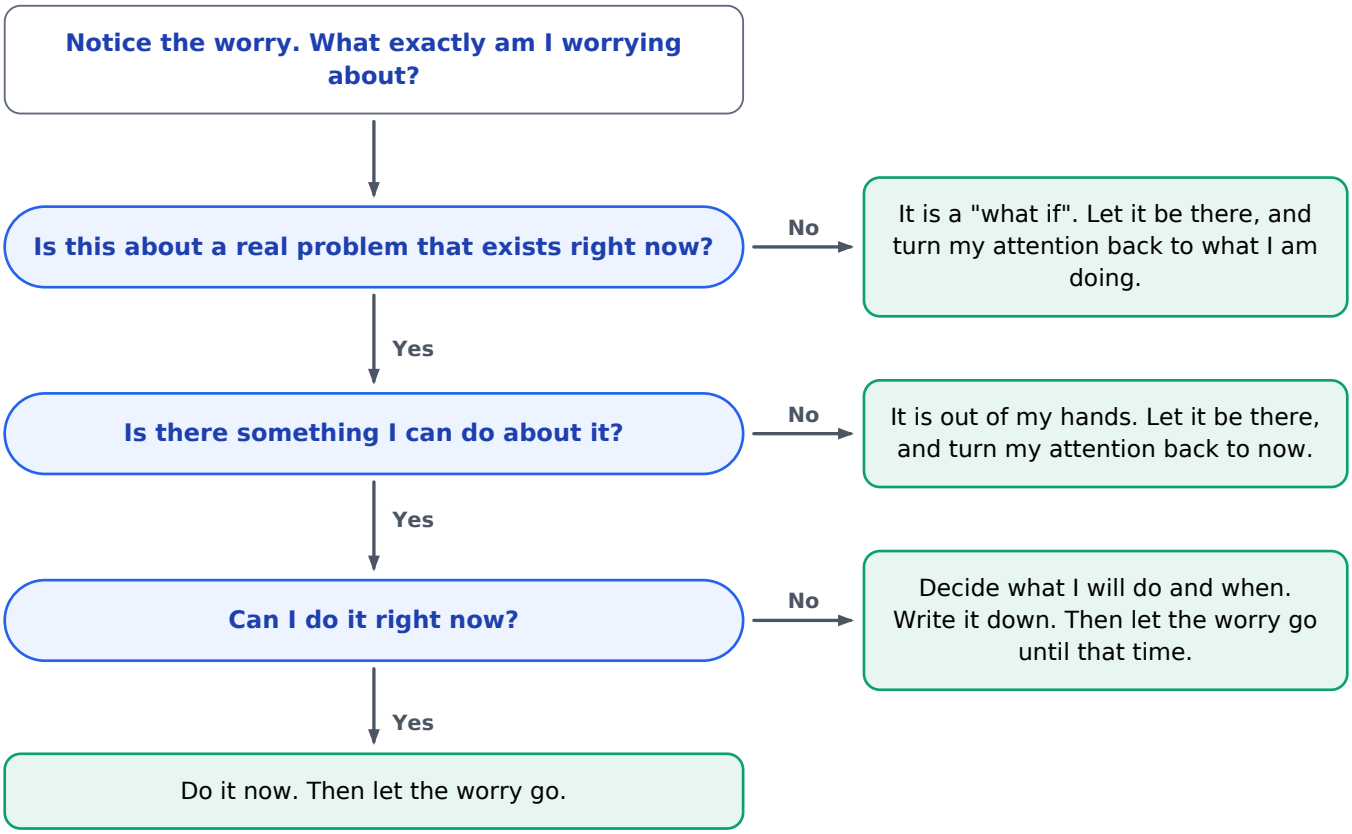
My worry	Practical or hypothetical?	If practical, my next step
What if the landlord puts the rent up?	*Hypothetical for now*	*None. Come back to it if a letter arrives.*

For the hypothetical ones
Notice it, name it ("that is a what-if"), and bring your attention back to what you are doing. It will come back. Do the same again.

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The worry decision tree

Three questions to ask when a worry shows up.



How to let a worry go

Letting a worry go does not mean forcing it out of your head, which makes it come back stronger. It means deciding not to follow it, and moving your attention to something else: the task in front of you, the room around you, your feet on the floor.

The worry will probably return, often within minutes. That is normal. Each time you notice it and come back, the habit of worrying gets a little weaker.

Based on the worry decision tree described by Gillian Butler and Tony Hope in Manage Your Mind.

My notes and questions

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Worry time

Postpone worrying to one set time each day.

Worrying on and off all day keeps your mind on high alert. Setting aside one short period to worry on purpose teaches your mind that worry can wait, and that you are in charge of when it happens.

How to do it

1. **Pick a time and place.** Fifteen to twenty minutes, at the same time each day. Not in bed, and not in the hour before sleep.
2. **During the day, catch and postpone.** When a worry arrives, jot down a word or two and tell yourself, "Not now. I will think about that at half six."
3. **Come back to the present.** Turn your attention to what you were doing. The worry will tug at you. Postpone it again.
4. **Keep the appointment.** At worry time, take out your list. Worry about anything on it that still matters.
5. **Sort as you go.** If a worry is a real problem, write a next step. If it is a "what if", let it be.
6. **Stop when the time is up.** Close the notebook and do something absorbing.

What people usually find

- Many worries no longer seem important by the time worry time comes round.
- Worrying on purpose is surprisingly hard to keep up for twenty minutes.
- The urge to worry "right now" gets weaker with practice.

My worry time	What I will do straight afterwards
When and where?	Something that holds my attention

If it feels impossible

Postponing gets easier with repetition. Aim to put off a worry for ten minutes at first, then build up.

Worry time is based on the stimulus control approach to worry developed by Thomas Borkovec.

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Postponed worries

A list for the worries you have put off until worry time.

Name _____ Date _____

Time	The worry, in a few words	Still matters at worry time?	What I did with it
10.40	*Did I offend Sarah yesterday?*	*No*	*Let it go*

What have I noticed this week about postponing worry?

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Worry diary

A week of tracking what you worry about, and what actually happens.

Name _____ Date _____

Fill in the first three columns when you catch yourself worrying. Come back later to fill in the last one.

Date	What I was worried about	How anxious (0 to 10)	What actually happened

At the end of the week: how many of my worries came true? When they did, how did I cope?

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Beliefs about worry

What I believe about worrying: that it helps, and that it harms.

Name _____ Date _____

Most people who worry a lot hold two sets of beliefs at once: that worry is useful, and that worry is harmful. Tick any that ring true.

Worry is useful

"Worrying helps me be prepared." "If I worry, bad things are less likely." "Worrying shows I am a caring person." "It helps me solve problems."

Worry is harmful

"I cannot control my worrying." "Worry could make me ill." "If I keep worrying, I will lose my mind."

One belief of mine about worry being useful

Evidence that it is true	Evidence that it is not
	Has worry ever changed an outcome? Do people who worry less care less?

One belief of mine about worry being harmful or out of control

Evidence that it is true	Evidence that it is not
	Have I ever stopped worrying when something else needed my attention?

An experiment I could try. For example: worry on purpose on Monday, postpone all worry on Tuesday, and compare the two days.

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Tolerating uncertainty

Why needing to be sure drives worry, and how to get used to not knowing.

Nobody likes not knowing. For some people, though, uncertainty feels almost like an allergy: even a small amount sets off a big reaction. Worry, checking and reassurance are all ways of trying to feel sure.

The trouble is that life cannot be made certain. However much you check or plan, another "what if" appears. What helps is building up your tolerance for not knowing.

Ways people try to get certainty

- [ ] Asking others for reassurance
- [ ] Checking and rechecking
- [ ] Making lists for everything
- [ ] Researching for hours before deciding
- [ ] Putting off decisions
- [ ] Doing everything myself, not delegating
- [ ] Avoiding anything new or unplanned
- [ ] Phoning or texting to check people are safe

What it costs

All of these work for a few minutes. Then doubt creeps back, and the behaviour has to be repeated. Over time your world gets smaller, decisions get harder, and your confidence in your own judgement drops.

Building tolerance

1. Choose one small certainty-seeking habit.
2. Drop it, on purpose, as an experiment. Send the email after one read. Order something new. Let someone else choose.
3. Notice what you predict will happen, and what does happen.
4. Notice that the discomfort rises, peaks and fades without you doing anything.
5. Repeat, and gradually take on bigger ones.

> **A phrase that helps**
> "Maybe, maybe not. I can live with not knowing."

Draws on the work of Michel Dugas and colleagues on intolerance of uncertainty.

My notes and questions

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Uncertainty experiments

Drop one certainty-seeking habit at a time and record what happens.

Name _____ Date _____

Pick habits you use to feel certain, and try doing without them. Start small.

What I did differently	What I feared would happen	What actually happened	If it went wrong, how did I cope?
Sent a work email after reading it once	*It would have a mistake and I would look careless*	*Nobody said anything*	*Not needed*

What am I learning about uncertainty, and about myself?

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Problem solving in six steps

For real, practical problems that need a decision or an action.

Name _____ Date _____

1. What exactly is the problem? Be specific, and take one problem at a time.

2. Every option I can think of. Do not judge them yet. Include the daft ones.

3. Options worth a closer look	Points for	Points against

4. The option, or mix of options, I will try

5. My plan	First small step
What will I do, and when?	Something I can do in the next day or two

6. Review. How did it go? What would I keep, and what would I change?

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