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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