

# Worry and how to manage it



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WORRY

and how to manage it

‘Worry was a bad habit, which seemed to grow worse the older [Wallander] got. He worried about everything. He worried when Baiba went to Tallin, he worried that he was going to get sick; he worried that he might oversleep or that his car might break down. He wrapped himself in clouds of anxiety. With a grimace he wondered.....how could he free himself from all the problems he created.’

From: Sidetracked: a Kurt Wallander mystery  
by Henning Mankell

## Worry

Like Wallander, do you also find yourself caught in the grip of worry?

Do you find yourself saying, 'What if this happens, then what if that happens...' and so on until you are caught up in a *chain of worries* and *what if's ...?*

If you do, you may be an excessive worrier, and particularly if you feel you have lost control of worry, you may have a recognised condition called Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD).

It is thought that about 7% of the population will suffer from GAD at some time, with women being twice as likely to have this problem as men. There is no one known cause, but there could be a variety of factors that result in this chronic condition.

People with GAD worry about many things: everything that *might* happen.

Most of us will worry and feel anxious at one time or another about something during our lives. We may worry about whether we will get a job after graduation or whether our money will go far enough to pay the bills; or about our health or the health of someone close to us.

Those who have GAD, however, worry excessively about everything all the time.

As a result, they often feel on edge, exhausted with physical symptoms such as nausea, stomach complaints and muscle tension, especially around the neck and shoulders.

Sleep is often affected as the mind appears to race into action as soon as the head hits the pillow. During the day, worriers feel that their mind is in overdrive, so it is difficult for them to concentrate. Worries come in *chains of worries* that begin with those *what ifs*, until the chain of worry ends up in an imagined catastrophising event.

It is understandable that worry can cause anxiety and low mood. In some cases worry precedes depression which then contributes to a lack of confidence and low motivation. Excessive and enduring worry can have a detrimental effect on the quality of a person's life.

Excessive worriers have a problem living in the 'here and now'. They are always worrying about the future so are unable to enjoy the moment. Excessive worriers who are also depressed can spend time chewing over past events whilst worrying about what might happen in the future, so they miss out on day to day pleasurable moments. Life is very tough for these people.

Does any of the previous information strike a chord with you?

Take a moment to reflect and ask yourself the questions below:

- Are your worries the normal result of changes in your life?
- Do your worries strike you as excessive and longstanding?
- If things are going well in your life, are you still worried about what may be around the corner?
- If someone else was in your shoes, would they be worrying as much as you do?
- Can you tolerate uncertainty or do you find it upsetting and stressful?
- Do you think that you are a good problem solver, or do you put things off and worry about them instead?
- Do you think you have lost control of the worry?

Note down your responses.

This may help to clarify the level of your worry.

Worry has been defined as follows:

‘Worry is a thought process that is concerned about future events where there is uncertainty about the outcome, the future being thought about is a negative one, and thus accompanied by feelings of anxiety’. (Dugas and Robichaud: 2007)

Some people describe themselves as ‘born worriers’ and find it difficult to imagine a life without worrying.

Many worriers believe that there are advantages to worrying.

‘How can there be any advantages to worrying?’ you might ask.

Here are some answers suggested by worriers:

- It means I am prepared for all eventualities
- It shows that I am a caring and responsible person
- If I didn’t worry I would not get anything done
- If I think of everything that might go wrong there will be no surprises and I will be able to cope/be prepared for the worst if it should happen
- If the worst does not happen it is because I have worried about it
- I would worry if I was not worrying
- Worrying helps me to problem solve
- Worrying stops bad things happening

Most worriers do admit that there are also disadvantages to their worrying. Some of these they mention are:

- High levels of anxiety which cause changes in physical sensations in the body
- Exhaustion, low mood, insomnia
- Depression
- Reduced effectiveness at work/study
- Procrastination and avoidance
- An inability to relax
- Waste of time as often the worst does not happen
- Worry about worrying: 'Am I going mad?'

As it is often hard for worriers to switch off from worrying, it is common for worriers to worry about their worrying.

Worriers have a low tolerance for accepting uncertainty. Worriers try and worry in order to make the uncertain certain; hence this constant thought process or 'over-thinking'.

Worriers often find it difficult to deal with emotions such as being unhappy or uncomfortable, and use worry as a way of avoiding emotions by trying to think their way out of sadness or discomfort.



Many worriers have little belief in their ability to problem solve; hence they engage in worry as a way of coping. They often postpone taking any action as they are busy worrying what might happen in the future; hence they miss out on enjoyment in the present.

There is a high price to pay in terms of mental wellbeing for those who are constantly worrying.

But all is not lost. There is help for those who want to manage their worry.

The Student Counselling Service offers a range of interventions that may be beneficial for those experiencing worry. These include Relaxation techniques, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Mindfulness and Counselling.

For details of how to contact us for an appointment, please see our website: [www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling) .

To understand more about worry, how it affects your life and how you are maintaining your worry, it may be useful for you to read further about the topic. There is a list of recommended self-help CBT books at the end of the leaflet.

A book recommended by past students is *The worry cure* by Robert Leahy. This is very readable, written with a light, compassionate and humane touch. Leahy deals with the subject of 'Worry' in a way that many students have found helpful, a typical comment being: 'He has written about me'.

If you get yourself a copy of *The worry cure*, read the introduction, '*The seven rules of highly worried people*' and see if any rules apply to you. If you think they do, carry on and read chapter 1, *Understanding worry* and chapter 2, *The worse ways to handle worry*. In chapter 2 you will read about Leahy's '*Dirty dozen: twelve strategies that don't work*'; this will help you to identify ways that you might be maintaining your worry without realising it.

Reading and working your way through *The worry cure* may be all the help you need but, depending on the severity and the length of time you have been struggling with worry, you may want to contact the Student Counselling Service for an appointment.

If you decide to come to the Student Counselling Service, you will have an initial appointment where you and the counsellor will work together to understand how worry is affecting your life.

You and your counsellor will work collaboratively on an individualised plan which could, for example, include:

- You reading and finding out more about your problem
- You assessing how much time you spend worrying in a week
- You keeping a worry log, noting any specific themes that occur and the predictions that you are making
- You and your counsellor looking at the management of worry itself rather than the individual worries you may have
- You and your counsellor reviewing your sleep, exercise and other life style issues
- You reviewing the impact of worry on your academic work
- You learning relaxation skills
- You learning how 'Worry Time' will help you to accept uncertainty
- You learning to challenge your negative automatic thoughts
- You learning problem-solving skills

Everyone's worry is unique to them, so you and your counsellor will work together to find the best approach for you.

The Student Counselling Service is available at Plymouth, PAHC and Truro campuses. All counselling staff will be able to work with you to address your worry.

If you are based in Plymouth and you are particularly interested in a CBT approach, you can contact the Student Counselling Service and ask to speak to Maggie Morris, who will be pleased to follow up your queries and concerns.

In CBT you and your therapist will agree on the work that you will do in between sessions to help you get better quicker. This could involve reading, keeping a weekly log, practising 'Worry Time', practising dealing with uncertainty and feeling uncomfortable. The 'in between' session work will be collaboratively agreed and realistic for you to achieve successfully along with the constraints of your study and life.

Neither counselling nor CBT are quick fixes; it cannot be 'done to you'. It will require commitment from you to attend weekly sessions and to be active in your therapy.

## Further Reading

Leahy, R.L. (2006) *The worry cure: stop worrying and start living*. London: Piatkus

Leahy, R.L. (2009) *Anxiety free: unravel your fears before they unravel you*. London: Hay House

Meares, K. & Freeston, M. (2008) *Overcoming worry: a self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques*. London: Constable & Robinson

[www.livinglifetothefull.com](http://www.livinglifetothefull.com) is a very useful, free and confidential CBT self-help website

## Reference

Dugas, M.J. & Robichaud, M (2007) *Cognitive Behavioural Treatment for Generalized Anxiety Disorder: from science to practice*. Oxford: Routledge

## Student Counselling Service

If you would like help with worry or any other problem please go to the Student Counselling website at [www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling) for details about all the services we offer.

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