

Excerpt from Rethink it!

By Michael Cohen

Overcoming worry

Are you a chronic worrier constantly worrying your days away about almost everything? Do you worry about your health, work performance, being liked by others, your academic performance as well as a host of other issues? These worries can take a heavy toll, keeping you stressed and anxious during the day and wide awake at night. Worry eats away at you, causes you to feel tired and creates aches and pains; it can affect relationships, and even lead to depression.

Some people seem to have a predisposition to worrying about trivial matters before those worries have even seen the light of day, while others may only worry minimally about something once it has actually happened and then, if possible, go on to resolve it. Why is there this difference amongst people and what can be done about it?

Beliefs about worry

Samantha believes that her all-consuming worrying is harmful to her and that it is going to drive her insane. A year ago Samantha had a cancer scare which fortunately proved negative. However since that scare she worries about her health on a regular basis. She thinks worry is taking over her life and will cause her real physical ill-health. Family and

friends have told her to pull herself together which causes her anger because she finds it so difficult to stop the worry.

Barry believes that his worrying serves a useful purpose. He thinks it keeps him alert and on guard helping him to avoid bad situations arising at work, prevent problems, and even helps him to resolve difficult situations.

It is self-evident that negative beliefs about worry create more worry and increase anxiety. Barry's positive belief about his worry can also take its toll and can be self-defeating – a problem rather than a solution.

What is worry?

According to Dr Robert Leahy, a leading expert in the field of cognitive therapy, worry is a strategy. If you are confronted with some worrying thoughts such as *“I might have a terminal disease”* or my *“boss might sack me,”* you activate a string of negative thoughts believing that if you worry excessively you may develop some form of control over events. You may also think that the worry will enable you to eliminate uncertainty and get an answer to the thing you are worrying about. So in this sense worry becomes your strategy. But has this approach ever truly worked for you? Is it productive? Has it ever given you the answer to your problems or has it just caused you more misery?

Jane was due to give a presentation to a group of associates at work. Jane would lie awake at night worrying about giving the presentation. She would say to herself:

“What if I can’t remember what to say and go blank?”

“What will they say about me?”

“What if they think I’m stupid?”

“What if my presentation handouts don’t make any

sense?”

Jane’s worrying thoughts are a demand for certainty. What lies behind them is the demand that, *“I must be perfect and not make a mistake. If I do that would be terrible and people would think badly of me.”*

While the last thing anyone wants is to make a mistake we all have to accept limitations.

We need to accept the possibility that we may make mistakes, that we never have complete control over events. We make mistakes because we are all fallible human beings.

Productive vs unproductive worry

Jane’s first three thoughts are unproductive. There is very little she can do about them. However there is something she can do about the fourth thought. She can, for instance, check her notes for clarity, perhaps ask a colleague to read them to see if they can be improved upon or to scout for any spelling or grammatical mistakes. Therefore this thought is classified as a productive worry.

Make a list of your worries. Ask yourself:

Which of these worries is productive?

Which are unproductive?

Will these thoughts help me or hinder me?

Is there anything in these thoughts I can use today that will really help me make progress on the problem I am worrying about?

Then you can make a to-do list with the productive worries.

Rethink it!

Five Steps to End Chronic Worrying

Dr Robert Leahy has written extensively on the subject of

worry and he has developed worry busting techniques:

1. "The Boredom Technique."

A technique that many people find helpful is to repeat a negative worry hundreds of times.

"What if I can't remember what to say and go blank?"

Repeating this thought for 15 to 20 minutes, slowly, and deliberately while focusing on the words will lead to you becoming incredibly bored with your worry. This is called, The Boredom Technique and can be very effective. By repeating a feared thought over and over again it will become boring, lose its power over you and will eventually go away.

2. Deliberately make yourself uncomfortable.

When we worry we tend to believe that we can't tolerate discomfort, but if you practice discomfort by putting yourself into the sort of situations that you worry about, you will accomplish control and worry a lot less. When we worry we tend to avoid new things and situations that make us uncomfortable, such as social situations or public speaking engagements. The initial 'what if' worries cause us to avoid discomfort, but if you force yourself to do the very things that make you uncomfortable, you will rely less on worry as a way of coping .

3. Create two daily worry times

Instead of resisting your worries, you choose periods during the day that you purposely devote to worrying. This is time you set aside exclusively for worry: an appointment with worry. This idea may seem odd because it runs counter to our usual instincts. But it's usually very helpful because, instead of "putting out fires with petrol," we are "fighting

fire with fire.”

The first worry time could be in the morning before you go off to work. Sit down in a place where you are unlikely to be disturbed and pay attention to your worries. Your second worry time could be right after you get home from work. This is how it is done:

A Set aside two daily ‘Worry Times’ of about 15 minutes each.

B Spend this time thinking only about your worries and only about one issue.

C Do not think about any positive alternatives but only the negative ones.

D Get yourself to become as anxious as you can while worrying.

E Reach the end of each worry time, even if you have run out of ideas and have to repeat the same worries over again.

F At the end of 15 minutes, let those worries go with some deep relaxing breaths, and return to your daily routine.

The main benefit of this technique comes about during the rest of your day, when you're not engaged in a worry period. If you find yourself worrying when you're not in your allotted worry period give yourself the following advice: I can either take 15 minutes now to worry very deliberately about this issue or postpone it to my next worry period.

The postponing can be very effective and enables many people to have large amounts of their day clear of worry. This technique involves a commitment; however the rewards can make it very worthwhile.

4. Challenge your worrying thoughts.

Do you treat every worry you have as a fact? Extreme worry can cause us to perceive situations as being far more dangerous than they actually are. We may for instance overestimate the possibility that things will go disastrously wrong, always imagining a worst case scenario while underestimating the possibility that they may not be nearly as bad as we imagine. We may also discount our ability to cope with challenging situations, forgetting that we have used our many resources to cope with difficult situations in the past. These unhelpful irrational attitudes are called cognitive distortions and you can read more about them in Part One Section 2. *Don't Get Derailed by Distorted Thinking*.

Challenging your worrying thoughts can help you to develop a more balanced view. Rather than viewing your thoughts as a forgone conclusion you test them out by challenging them. This is how it is done:

1. Identify and write down a situation you are worrying about – be specific.

2. Write down the worries you have about that situation.

3. Take each worrying thought in turn and challenge that thought by asking one or more of the following questions:

“What is the evidence that this thought is true?”

“What evidence do I have that what I am worrying about will actually happen?”

“What is the probability it will happen?”

“What are the more likely and realistic outcomes to this thing I am worrying about?”

“Is the thought helpful?”

“How will worrying about it help me?”

“How will worrying about it hurt me?”

“Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?”

5. Relax your worries away.

Relaxation techniques such as mindfulness, deep breathing, and meditation can all help the worrier. In addition to the emotional factors involved, worrying can also bring on unpleasant physical sensations such as over breathing, tense painful muscles, headaches etc. Since you cannot be anxious and relaxed at the same time, strengthening your body’s relaxation response makes a lot of sense as it can help reduce your worry.

In the next part of the book I expand on mindfulness and other relaxation techniques but in this section I will teach you a worry-busting relaxation technique called progressive muscle relaxation.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This technique focuses on deep muscle relaxation and was first developed in the 1920s by Dr Edmund Jacobson. Over the years it has been refined and modified so that it now involves tightening different muscle groups. If you have neck, back or teeth problems, you may wish to modify the procedure. If in doubt consult a qualified medic.

This is how it is done:

1. Sit or lie down in a quiet comfortable place. Remove contact lenses and any objects such as jewellery. Uncross your arms and legs. Take a deep breath and hold for as long as you find comfortable. Breath out – letting all feelings of tension leave your body.

2. Clench your right fist tight and then tighter. Notice the

tension in your clenched fist, hand and arm. Now relax your fist and feel your right hand and arm go loose and limp. Notice the contrast with the tension. Repeat the procedure with your left fist and then both fists together.

3. Focus your attention on your forehead. Pull your eyebrows together as tightly as possible and hold. Now relax and let your forehead smooth out. Notice the contrast between tension and relaxation. Repeat the procedure and notice how relaxed your forehead becomes.

4. Close your eyes together as tightly as possible, feel the tension. Now relax your eyes letting your eyelids droop. Keep your eyes closed, repeat the procedure. You can let your eyes remain closed for the rest of the exercise.

5. Clench your jaw biting your back teeth together. Feel the tension as it spreads throughout your jaw. Now relax your jaw. Once again, notice the contrast between tension and relaxation, then repeat the procedure.

6. Pull your head back as far as is comfortable. Feel the tension in your neck, hold, and then roll your head slowly to the right and then to the left. Notice the tension. Then straighten your head and bring it forward, pushing your chin onto your chest. Feel the tension in the back of your neck. Relax and allow your head to return to a comfortable position. Repeat the procedure and allow the relaxation to deepen.

7. Hunch your shoulders and hold for as long as is comfortable. Feel the tension. Then let your shoulders relax. Feel the relaxation spreading. Repeat the procedure and see how relaxed your shoulders can become.

8. Focus on the rhythm of your breathing, the rise and

the fall of your diaphragm and chest. Notice how heavy your body is becoming with every breath that you take, feel your body relax just that little bit more.

9. Pull in your stomach muscles. Hold for as long as is comfortable, feel the tension and then relax. Repeat.

10. Tighten your buttocks and thighs. Push your heels down as hard as you can. Feel the tension, hold for as long as is comfortable and then relax. Notice the contrast between the tension and relaxation. Repeat.

11. Point your toes in a downward direction and notice your calves growing tense. Feel the tension and hold for as long as is comfortable, then relax. Repeat.

12. Focus your attention on the comfortable feelings in your body, from the top of your head to the tips of your toes. Notice how relaxed you have become. You can now drift to a relaxing place in your imagination. It can be somewhere familiar to you or it may be an imaginary place that only exists in your mind. When you are ready, open your eyes.

For best results, practice progressive muscle relaxation on a regular basis for approximately 20 minutes each time. Do not rush it. After practicing the procedure you may notice tension in parts of your body that you thought did not exist. This is not an unusual experience and is an indication that you are becoming aware of the parts of your body where you hold onto tension. With practice this will pass.

Be Your Own Best Friend