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Worry (Information Handout)

A worry is a thought, a negative thought about the future.

Worrying is the thinking part of anxiety and usually starts with a 'What if...' For example 'What if I can't get a job?' 'What if someone attacks me?' 'What if I have a terminal illness?' 'What if I never get better?' 'What if I am in an accident?'

This type of thinking can impact upon our emotions and feel distressing. So why do we do it?? It is important to remember that **we worry for a reason** – people do it because they think it will be helpful or that it is the best way to cope.

Positive beliefs about worry

Worry will help me to be prepared for the worst

Worry will help me avoid bad things happening and keep me safe

I need to worry in order to cope

So if worry is so helpful, why don't we just worry more and be really safe and prepared?

This is what some people do! The happy worriers! However, often when asked this question people say they do not want to worry too much because they think it might make them ill, it causes too much distress/discomfort, it's distracting, it impacts upon sleep, it's stressful and they don't feel like they can control it... **It is important to remember that anxiety is not harmful – it does not make you ill. It is also important to remember that worry is controllable!**

The Dilemma!!

It is important to realise that this is a dilemma: **should you worry to be safe OR not worry in order to be relaxed, focussed and happy?** Worry is a strategy and it is controllable, you may just be using it ineffectively and inefficiently.

Resolving the Dilemma:

It is important to remember that thoughts (such as any involved in worry):

- Cannot harm you
- Are controllable

They only feel out of control because of the dilemma that you are in and the conflicting coping responses we use (i.e. do we focus towards such negative thoughts or away from them?). We need to use a better method of coping. This involves adding structure to your worry so that it does not intrude upon your entire day. That way you can actually be more effective and focussed with your worrying and preparation for danger.



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Alternative to unstructured worry (a step by step guide)

How to worry well:

Step 1:

Begin to notice when you are worrying / ruminating. It will be such a habit that you may struggle to notice that you are doing it. The first step is to reflect on the process. Be aware of the difference between the trigger (the initial thought) and the process (the continued effort).

Step 2:

Begin to delay your worry. You can maintain all of the positive parts of worry by doing it at a specific point in the day (e.g. 6pm). During the rest of the day say to yourself 'I will think about this properly later'.

Step 3:

Dismiss thoughts associated with the worry. You do not need to reassure yourself. Triggers may still pop into your mind, you do not need to respond to each one.

Step 4:

During a 'worry period', you can focus on your worries for a specific amount of time. You may then be able to actively problem-solve and explore lessons from past mistakes. This may not be a pleasant moment in your day, however, it is only for a brief period and will be more likely to be useful.

Detached mindfulness*

It can help to learn how to disengage from thoughts. This is so that you can disrupt or delay the worry process until you have decided to worry / problem-solve on purpose in a focussed effective way.

Clouds metaphor

It is sometimes useful to experience your thoughts as you would experience clouds passing you by in the sky. The clouds are part of the Earth's self-regulating weather system, and it would be impossible and unnecessary to try and control them. Try to treat your thoughts like you would treat passing clouds and allow them to occupy their own space and time in the knowledge that they will eventually pass you by.

Train metaphor

It is helpful to think of yourself as a passenger waiting for a train. Your mind is like a busy station and your thoughts and feelings are the trains passing through. There is no point in trying to stop and climb aboard a train that is passing by. Just be a bystander and watch your thoughts pass through. There is no point in climbing aboard to be whisked away to the wrong place.



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Misbehaving Child Metaphor

You can think of detached mindfulness as similar to the way you might deal with a child. How would you manage a child misbehaving in a store? You could pay a great deal of attention to the child and try to control the child's behaviour. But if the child craves attention this response could make things worse. It is better not to actively engage with the child but to keep watch over the child without doing anything. Your negative thoughts and beliefs are like that child. If you pay them a great deal of attention, if you control them or use punishment, they misbehave even more. It is better not to try and control or actively engage with them, just keep a watching manner over everything. As you do this, try to be aware of yourself as the observer of these things.

Healing Metaphor

Overcoming a psychological injury caused by trauma is very much like overcoming a physical injury such as a cut to the skin. If you think of a physical injury the body has its own way of healing itself over time. But what would happen if you tried to make the injury heal, say by picking at the scar and repeatedly cleaning the wound? How quickly would it heal? Trauma symptoms are like this. Over time the mind can heal itself and this often occurs. However, just like a flesh wound, if you interfere with the healing process it can take longer and symptoms can persist. You are interfering with the healing process by engaging in worry / rumination, by avoiding thoughts, and by keeping attention focussed on threat. The goal of treatment is to remove these unhelpful responses so that normal healing can be resumed

Problem-solving: Exercise Handout

In order to make 'worry periods' more useful and protective, the following process of problem-solving can be used.

The steps for problem-solving are:

1. Identify the problem / dilemma and define it as specifically as possible
2. Think of all the possible solutions or options available
3. One by one, consider the advantages, then disadvantages of each solution / option
4. Weigh up the option and make a decision regarding which one to go for
5. Carry out the plan
6. Review whether it has been a success (bear in mind that you will need to consider how to decide whether it was a success or not).