

How to Stop Worrying

Source: [Headspace](#)

Most thoughts, emotions, and anxiousness caused by worry are negative, imagining worst-case scenarios, anticipated threats, or scenarios that reflect our own lack of self-worth.

For instance, the worry could be that someone we're meeting won't like us; or that an upcoming flight will lead to an emergency landing; or that the nagging pain we've noticed might well be a serious health condition. Most of the time, our worries don't pan out. That's because worry is often invented by the mind, and is rarely rooted in fact or truth. Eventually, we come to realize that worry doesn't prevent tomorrow's troubles, it just robs today of its joy. As an old quote goes: "Worry is the interest you pay on a debt you may not owe."

Occasional anxieties are a normal part of life. In fact, our brains are evolutionarily wired to worry: our cave-dwelling ancestors, who imagined the worst when they heard leaves rustle, had better odds of surviving a predator by being in this state of constant alert. So worrying, to some extent, is a natural part of life – we worry about paying a bill, or how a first date might turn out, or if the weather might ruin a planned BBQ.

But it's when the "what ifs" are persistent and run rampant – attaching themselves to every possible outcome – that worry becomes a chronic source of anxiety, leading to insomnia, headaches, stomach problems, and more. At its most extreme, worry can be paralyzing, interfering with how we show up in everyday life, and preventing us from taking action, even if it's simply to cook dinner for friends (because ... maybe it won't taste good, etc.). Chronic worrying can also indicate Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), so it's always worth seeking a healthcare professional's advice if worrying has become a preoccupying mindset. Harvard researcher and lecturer Shawn Achor writes in his book *The Happiness Advantage*, "Adversities, no matter what they are, simply don't hit us as hard as we think they will. Our fear of consequences is always worse than the consequences themselves."

Chronic worry is a mental habit that, over time, can be broken

For some worriers, anxious thoughts are fueled by an underlying belief about worrying – that it's somehow protective, will help us avoid bad things, or prepare us for the worst. Worry might keep our minds busy, but not in a constructive way. So we owe it ourselves to break the worry habit. Here's how to stop worrying about everything, or at least how to worry less.

1. Schedule "worry time" on your calendar.

It sounds counterintuitive, even a little silly, but setting aside 20 or 30 minutes each day to focus on your worries is a first step toward containing them. Studies, including one at Penn State University, found that those who scheduled time to worry showed a significant decrease in anxiety in 2 to 4 weeks – plus they slept better.

Your worry period should be the same time every day – first thing in the morning or at the end of the day. During this designated but limited worry time, you can worry as much as you like, going down the mental rabbit holes your mind loves to create. But the discipline here – and the test of willpower – is that the worries are not only indulged in this time, but left there. They are not allowed to spill into the rest of the day. Of course, worries will inevitably arise outside of this time slot, but that's when to practice mindfulness: acknowledge the thought, but don't indulge it; simply let it go and refuse to allow your mind to go there. Busy yourselves at such times with a task, a conversation, or some entertainment.

Learning to limit anxious thoughts shows that you actually have more control over them than you think. You're training your mind not to dwell on worries at all hours of the day or night. Plus, you'll have more available hours in the day (not to mention energy) for productive thinking.

2. Practice meditation

Another skill for learning how to stop worrying about the future – or obsessing about the past – is a regular meditation practice. By sitting quietly and focusing either on the breath or on the physical sensations of the chair beneath you or the feet on the floor, you'll ground yourself in the present moment, allowing for a greater sense of calm. Meditation isn't about pushing worries away, clearing the mind, or stopping thought – that's not possible. But over time, we can train the mind to observe our thoughts and emotions without getting caught up in them. We gently note them, rather than reacting to them, and then let them go.

Through meditation, we begin to see how our thoughts and feelings come and go, like cars on a busy road. When we take a step back and observe them in that way, we realize that our thoughts are temporary; that they don't define us, and we are not our thoughts.

3. Learn to distinguish between solvable and unsolvable worries

Productive, solvable worries are those you can act on right away. For instance, if you're concerned about your finances, you can draw up a spreadsheet and a monthly budget to rein in your spending. If it's high cholesterol and your health, you can lay off the fast food, make better choices at the grocery store, and start exercising.

Unproductive, unsolvable worries are those for which there's no corresponding action: You can't control the weather for your vacation.

If a worry is solvable, get to work on a plan of action! Once you start doing something, you'll feel less anxious.

If you're focusing on a situation that's out of your hands, meditation can help you become more at ease with uncertainty, and less stressed when things are not in your control. General meditation research shows that mindfulness training can reduce anxiety for those with anxiety disorders. It's clear that regularly setting aside a few minutes – even one minute – to let go, breathe, and recharge can go a long way toward improving mental health.

Uncertainty is one of the hardest things to feel comfortable with, especially for those with anxiety. But life is unpredictable, and learning to accept, and even lean in to our fear of the unknown, can make a difference on our emotional well-being.

4. Write down your worries

One powerful way to help us break the cycle of worry is to log each and every worrying thought that pops into our mind. Examining worries written on paper – rather than mulling them over in your head – can help you gain a more balanced perspective.

Committing your emotions to paper seems like it would fuel anxiety, but according to a University of Chicago study published in the journal *Science*, it actually has the opposite effect: students who were prone to pre-test anxiety and journaled about their fears before an exam improved their test scores by nearly one grade point.

Go gently with yourself at first. Maybe choose one week to keep a worry diary, making a promise to yourself that you'll write down every worrisome thought, however silly it might seem. At the end of that week, or whatever period of time you choose, the list will serve as a reflection of where your mind has gone in terms of imagined outcomes. Go through the list and challenge your anxious thoughts:

- What's the evidence that this thought is true? (Maybe there's none.)
- Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?
- Is what I'm worrying about within or out of my control?
- What's the likelihood that what I'm afraid of will actually happen? If it's low, what are some more likely outcomes?
- How does worrying help the situation, or doesn't it?