

How to UN-Worry

If you're plagued by exaggerated worry and tension, there are steps you can take to turn off anxious thoughts. Chronic worrying is a mental habit that can be broken. You can train your brain to stay calm and look at life from a more balanced, less fearful perspective.

TIP 1: Create a daily “worry” period

Rather than trying to stop or get rid of an anxious thought, give yourself permission to have it, but postpone dwelling on it until later. Choose a set time and place for worrying. It should be the same every day (e.g. in the living room from 5:00 to 5:20 p.m.) and early enough that it won't make you anxious right before bedtime. During your worry period, you're allowed to worry about whatever's on your mind. The rest of the day, however, is a worry-free zone.

Write down your worries. If an anxious thought or worry comes into your head during the day, make a brief note of it and then continue about your day. Remind yourself that you'll have time to think about it later, so there's no need to worry about it right now. Also, writing down your thoughts—on a pad or on your phone or computer—is much harder work than simply thinking them, so your worries are more likely to lose their power.

Go over your “worry list” during the worry period. If the thoughts you wrote down are still bothering you, allow yourself to worry about them, but only for the amount of time you've specified for your worry period. As you examine your worries in this way, you'll often find it easier to develop a more balanced perspective. And if your worries don't seem as important, simply cut your worry period short and enjoy the rest of your day.

TIP 2: Challenge anxious thoughts

If you suffer from chronic anxiety and worry, chances are you look at the world in ways that make it seem more threatening than it really is. For example, you may overestimate the possibility that things will turn out badly, jump immediately to worst-case scenarios, or treat every anxious thought as if it were fact. You may also discredit your own ability to handle life's problems, assuming you'll fall apart at the first sign of trouble.

During your worry period, challenge your negative thoughts by asking yourself: *What's the evidence that the thought is true? That it's not true? Is there a more positive, realistic way to look at the situation? What's the probability that what I'm worried about will actually happen? Is the thought helpful? How will worrying about it help me and how will it hurt me? What would I say to a friend who had this worry?*

TIP 3: Distinguish between solvable and unsolvable worries

Research shows that while you're worrying, you temporarily feel less anxious. Running over the problem in your head distracts you from your emotions and makes you feel like you're getting something accomplished. But worrying and problem solving are two very different things. Problem solving involves evaluating a situation, coming up with concrete steps for dealing with it, and then putting the plan into action. Worrying, on the other hand, rarely leads to solutions. No matter how much time you spend dwelling on worst-case scenarios, you're no more prepared to deal with them should they actually happen.

If the worry is solvable, start brainstorming. Productive, solvable worries are those you can take action on right away. Make a list of all the possible solutions you can think of. Don't get too hung up on finding the perfect solution. Focus on the things you have the power to change, rather than the circumstances or realities beyond your control. After you've evaluated your options, make a plan of action. Once you have a plan and start doing something about the problem, you'll feel much less anxious.

If the worry is not solvable, accept the uncertainty. If you're a chronic worrier, the vast majority of your anxious thoughts probably fall in this camp. Worrying is often a way we try to predict what the future has in store – a way to prevent unpleasant surprises and control the outcome. The problem is, it doesn't work. Thinking about all the things that could go wrong doesn't make life any more predictable. Focusing on worst-case scenarios will only keep you from enjoying the good things you have in the present. To stop worrying, tackle your need for certainty and immediate answers.

TIP 4: Interrupt the worry cycle

Get up and get moving. Exercise is a natural and effective anti-anxiety treatment because it releases endorphins which relieve tension and stress, boost energy, and enhance your sense of well-being. Even more importantly, by really focusing on how your body feels as you move, you can interrupt the constant flow of worries running through your head. Pay attention to the sensation of your feet hitting the ground as you walk, run, or dance, for example, or the rhythm of your breathing, or the feeling of the sun or wind on your skin.

Meditate. Meditation works by switching your focus from worrying about the future or dwelling on the past to what's happening right now. By being fully engaged in the present moment, you can interrupt the endless loop of negative thoughts and worries. And you don't need to sit cross-legged, light candles or incense, or chant. Simply find a quiet, comfortable place and choose one of the many free or inexpensive smartphone apps that can guide you through the meditation process.

Practice progressive muscle relaxation. This can help you break the endless loop of worrying by focusing your mind on your body instead of your thoughts. By alternately tensing and then releasing different muscle groups in your body, you release muscle tension in your body. And as your body relaxes, your mind will follow.

Try deep breathing. When you worry, you breathe faster and more shallowly, often leading to more anxiety. By practicing deep breathing exercises, you can calm your mind and quiet negative thoughts.

TIP 5: Talk about your worries

It may seem like a simplistic solution, but talking face to face with a trusted friend or family member — someone who will listen to you without judging, criticizing, or continually being distracted — is one of the most effective ways to calm your nervous system and diffuse anxiety. Saying your worries out loud can often help you to make sense of what you're feeling and put things in perspective. If your fears are unwarranted, verbalizing them can expose them for what they are — needless worries. And if your fears are justified, sharing them with someone else can produce solutions that you may not have thought of alone.

Build a strong support system. Human beings are social creatures. We're not meant to live in isolation. But a strong support system doesn't necessarily mean a vast network of friends. Don't underestimate the benefit of a few people you can trust and count on to be there for you. And if you don't feel that you have anyone to confide in, it's never too late to build new friendships.

Know who to avoid when you're feeling anxious. Your anxious take on life may be something you learned when you were growing up. If your mother is a chronic worrier, she is not the best person to call when you're feeling anxious—no matter how close you are. When considering who to turn to, ask yourself whether you tend to feel better or worse after talking to that person about a problem.

TIP 6: Practice mindfulness

Worrying is usually focused on the future—on what might happen and what you'll do about it—on the past, rehashing the things you've said or done. The centuries-old practice of mindfulness can help you break free of your worries by bringing your attention back to the present. This strategy is based on observing your worries and then letting them go, helping you identify where your thinking is causing problems and getting in touch with your emotions.

Acknowledge and observe your worries. Don't try to ignore, fight, or control them like you usually would. Instead, simply observe them as if from an outsider's perspective, without reacting or judging.

Let your worries go. Notice that when you don't try to control the anxious thoughts that pop up, they soon pass, like clouds moving across the sky. It's only when you engage your worries that you get stuck.

Stay focused on the present. Pay attention to the way your body feels, the rhythm of your breathing, your ever-changing emotions, and the thoughts that drift across your mind. If you find yourself getting stuck on a particular thought, bring your attention back to the present moment.

Repeat daily. Using mindfulness to stay focused on the present is a simple concept, but it takes time and regular practice to reap the benefits. At first, you'll probably find that your mind keeps wandering back to your worries. Try not to get frustrated. Each time you draw your focus back to the present, you're reinforcing a new mental habit that will help you break free of the negative worry cycle.