

Understanding stress and breaking the worry cycle

Did you know April is Stress Awareness Month?

What impact does worry have on your life?

Worrying and stress is a completely natural and normal part of life. In fact, there are times when worrying can be helpful, making us feel more alert and prepared for the challenge ahead, such as for an exam or a job interview.

However, worrying about lots of different things a lot of the time can leave you stuck in a vicious cycle of worry where your worries may start to feel uncontrollable, impact your behaviours and intrude on your day-to-day life. We also know this as anxiety.

Everyone's experience of worry is different but the signs and symptoms fit into four main areas: physical feelings, emotions, thoughts and behaviour. Each of these has a knock-on effect on the others and can have a detrimental impact on significant areas of your life, such as family and work.

Using the vicious worry cycle on next page as a guide, use a pen and paper, computer or phone to log the physical feelings, emotions, thoughts and behaviours you experience from an anxiety provoking situation and consider the impact these are having on your life.

Understanding types of worry

To work out how to best break the cycle of worry, you first need to pinpoint what type of worry it is you're experiencing.

Worries tend to fall into two main categories:

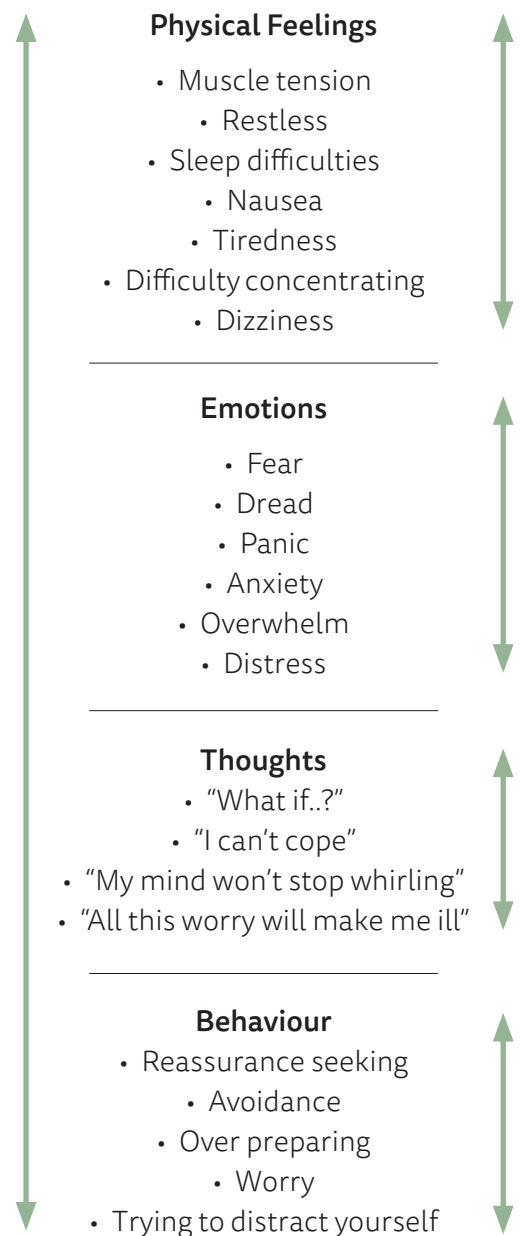
1. Practical worries

These are worries for which there is a practical solution. For example, "I have several extra bills this month and I haven't got enough money to pay them".

2. Hypothetical worries

These are the worries which you cannot control or solve. They are often worries you have about the past or the future. Often these worries start with "What if...". For example, "What if the train is late tomorrow and I can't get to my meeting".

Anxiety provoking situation



Impact

HOW TO MANAGE PRACTICAL WORRIES

A practical worry will always have a solution but it may feel too tricky or too overwhelming to pinpoint what that solution is. Following these five steps will help you to work out the solution that'll help to ease your worry. All you need to get started is a pen and paper, a computer or a device to record your thinking.

Step 1: Pinpoint the worry

Avoid generalisations and instead be specific about the practical problem.

Step 2: Identify solutions to the problem

Write down, type or record yourself saying all the solutions you can think of and don't rule any out too early.

Step 3: Write down, type or record the strengths and weaknesses of the solutions

Identify the pros and cons of each solution you've identified.

Step 4: Select the right solution for you and plan it out

Work out what steps you'll need to take to apply your solution to your worry.

Step 5: Put your plan into place and reflect on how it worked

If the solution didn't work, go back and try another.



HOW TO MANAGE HYPOTHETICAL WORRIES

It's important to know that when you feel overloaded with worries, it is not because you're weak, it is because brains have a limit and yours may have reached its capacity.

Whilst it's easier said than done, it's crucial you try and let go of these worries. One useful technique that can help you to do this is called Worry Time. So, how does it work?

1. Schedule undisturbed time in your diary each day to worry about your hypothetical worries

20 - 30 mins is usually enough, but you'll be the best judge of how much you need. Put it in your diary and don't let anything supersede it. Dedicating time to worrying will help you stop being a slave to your worries as they come in throughout the day.

2. Write down, type or record a list of your worries

Scribble as many worries down as you need and then put them aside. When you come to look back over your worries, you may find that some of them are redundant and are no longer a problem for you, or, they may have resolved themselves.

3. Find a distraction

Engage in a different activity immediately after your worry time to help you refocus and distract you from your list.



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TRY THIS TODAY. REMIND YOURSELF THAT THOUGHTS ARE NOT FACTS.

It's really important to know that our thoughts are not facts (even those that say they are). Reminding ourselves of this throughout the day can help us see our thoughts more clearly and choose which ones to act on.

And finally, our tip of the month; the one thing we ask you to do today if you do nothing else...

Talk to someone about how you're feeling. The small act of talking can make a big difference if you're experiencing stress and worry. But we understand that talking isn't always easy. Think about sending a text or writing a letter to someone if this feels more doable. If you feel overwhelmed with stress and worry and you're unable to manage this on your own, seek professional support from your GP or visit www.my-eap.com.

TOP TIP

If a worry does come to your mind outside of your dedicated worry time, log it, put it aside and engage in an activity to help keep your mind in the present moment.

