

# Worry

*Drevis Hager, EdD, LP  
Behavioral Health Services (BHSI)  
Golden Valley, MN*

## Worry is Pessimism

The problem with being human is that we are smart enough to know that the future is coming our way, but we can only guess as to what it will look like. Add pessimism to the formula and we have quite a recipe for emotional disturbance. We are all keenly interested in self-preservation. We don't want "bad" things to happen. We want to know that we will be able to cope and survive. We have two basic attitudes available to us when we think about the unknown: We can anticipate the future with an optimistic mindset - expecting that things will go well enough and that we will be able to cope; or we can expect problems and imagine that the problems will be insurmountable.

## Worrying isn't Preparing

Most worriers believe that they *must* worry in order to avoid or survive life's potential problems. But worry is not the same as planning and problem solving. When we anticipate possible problems it is good to plan our response(s). It is helpful to think, "OK, if ABC happens, then I will do XYZ." When we have contingency plans we can relax and let go of the issue. There is no need to worry. The worrier, on the other hand, is thinking "oh no, what if ABC happens?" (and isn't answering the question). The worrier is imagining the disaster, but does not advance to the stage of preparing a response. The worrier remains mentally fixated on the disastrous possibility, without any sense of assurance that he/she will be able to cope, and thus does not feel free to let go of the issue.

## Worry is Irrational

Because worry isn't the same as preparing, there is no survival value to it. If the dreaded event *doesn't* happen, then the worry will prove to be a waste of time and energy. If the dreaded event *does* happen, then the worry will prove to be - again - a waste of time and energy. Think about it. With either scenario, the worry proves to be unrelated to the outcome. Incidentally, it is estimated that, for the average person, 80% of the worried-about events don't ever happen. For the chronic worrier, the percentage is even higher.

## What You Can Do About Worry

- **Get Perspective.** First of all, take three or four deep breaths, and take at least as many steps back mentally. How big of a problem would this be if it actually materialized? Rate the potential problem from 1-100 (e.g. 1= a child won't eat his/her vegetables, 50= job loss, 100= death. Next, remember that 80% of worries never materialize. Make a second rating of how likely it is that the event will actually occur (e.g. 50% chance? 80%? 3%?). Given your ratings, is it really worth worrying?

- **Use Your Rational Mind.** Remind yourself that mere worry does not influence events. "Everything I have ever worried about has either *not* happened (and thus I've wasted my time and energy), or *has* happened (and thus I've wasted my time and energy)."
- **Make a Plan.** What will you do *if* ABC happens? Make a detailed plan and *write it down*. Keep these plans in a reliable place. Then take a deep breath and let yourself feel the relief associated with knowing that you are prepared and will survive.
- **Practice Optimism.** It is impossible to worry and think optimistically at the same time. Try it. Think to yourself "even if this thing does happen, how might it actually be for the best?" "How could it be an opportunity?" "I've handled a lot of problems in my life, I can handle this too." If you are having some difficulty thinking optimistically, you might have some success at imagining how *somebody else* – an optimist – might think about the situation. Optimism is a mental habit, and so is pessimism. Like any other habit, the more it gets repeated, the more automatic it becomes. If you practice thinking optimistically, at first it will seem difficult, strange, and maybe even phony. Keep practicing. The more that you practice, the more natural and automatic it will become.
- **Scheduled Worry.** This is an interesting technique that has helped countless worriers. The idea is that you actually allow yourself to worry – even frantically – *but only during a specified and limited time*. You might decide that you would worry each day from, say, noon until 12:30. Or perhaps you will want to stretch it out, e.g. only on Mondays and Thursdays from 1:00 – 2:00. In the interim you can build a list of potential events to worry about, but you should not allow yourself to actually worry until the designated time. Tell yourself, "I'll worry about that later; tomorrow at noon." This technique helps in two ways: 1) It trains the worrier to *compartmentalize*; that is, to develop greater mental discipline in deciding if, and when, worry will occur. 2) It helps the worrier to recognize the absurdity inherent in worry. This is especially true if – during the designated worry time – you deliberately worry feverishly.
- **Talk to somebody.** Share your worries with somebody. Let yourself be assured by the other person. Take on their optimistic perspective of the situation, even if just for a few minutes. Thank the other person for their perspective. Oh, and this is important: Make sure that the person that you share with is more optimistic than you are. The last thing that you need is another pessimist reinforcing your worry.