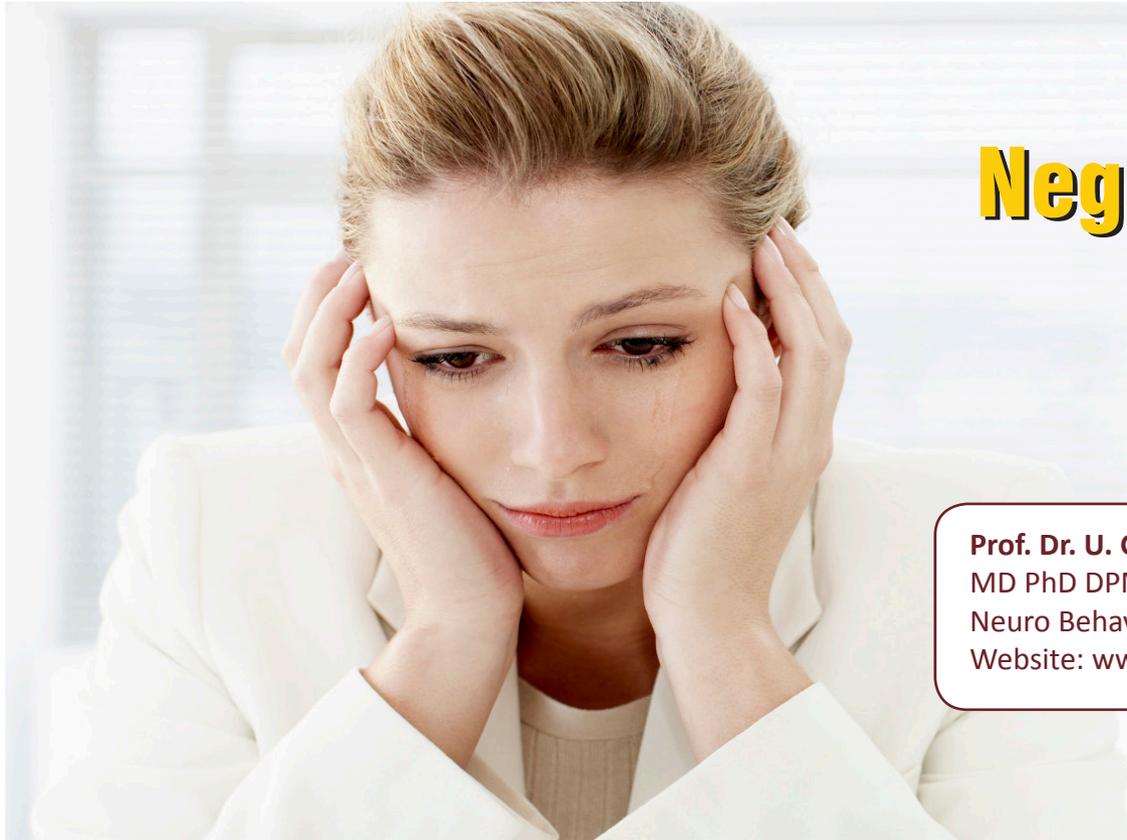


## GUEST COLUMN

# Worry: Let the Negative Thinking Out



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Worry is a natural human function. We all experience worry. Worry is a form of thinking that can be stressful if taken to extremes. The key features of worry are that it is repetitive and non-productive. When we are worrying, we are thinking about something over and over again but do not resolve the situation nor arrive at a solution to the problem.

When we continually think about the exam that will be given next week and imagine many distressing outcomes, yet do not study or do something actively to release the tension, we are worrying. When a close friend or family member is late and we begin to imagine all variety of accidents that may have befallen them, we are worrying. Frequently, there is nothing that can be done, but we worry anyway.

Worrying is obviously not a pleasant emotion, but it is actually an essential, normal, and instinctive emotion that has been programmed into humans since primordial times to help us survive. We worry about things that we perceive as threats to our existence. Worry causes us to focus on the threat and protect ourselves from that it. The cave man who did not worry was killed by hostile tribes or eaten by wild animals. The one, who worried, survived these threats and passed the worrying gene to future generations.

Real and present dangers to our well being and livelihoods do exist, and it is necessary to take steps to protect our self from harm. So healthy worrying has adaptive value, the

goal of which is to recognize and remove those threats and safeguard us from dangers. Unfortunately, worry can morph from that healthy, practical form of concern and vigilance to a preoccupation with perceived threats that are imagined and unlikely or not particularly threatening. These, unhealthy worries create stress that can have a negative effect on both your body and your mind.

Worrying can be helpful when it spurs you to take action and solve a problem. But if you're preoccupied with "what ifs" and worst-case scenarios, worry becomes a problem. Unrelenting doubts and fears can be paralyzing. They can sap your emotional energy, send your anxiety levels soaring, and interfere with your daily life. But 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 positive perspective.

Unhealthy worrying makes it difficult to concentrate or focus on things that have to be done. It can cause you to obsess so much on low-probability, low-consequence occurrences that they interfere with your thinking about high-probability; high consequence concerns and prevents you from enjoying your life. And it is these worries that can, metaphorically, strangle you. So, basically, worrying has been making us miserable probably since our species originated, and yet it has also, paradoxically, ensured our survival.

Unhealthy worry comes from the emotional baggage you acquired as a child and a deep,

often unconscious doubt that you won't be able to protect yourself such as: insecurity ("I live in a threatening world"), perfectionism ("If I make mistakes, I will be a failure"), need for control ("If I cannot control this situation, I am in danger"), social comparison ("People will think I'm a loser"), and pessimism ("The world is filled with dangers"). Unhealthy negative and obsessive thinking, leading to unnecessary doubt, and unnamed fear is actually a symptom of serious mental health issues that can become a problem in itself.

Studies show that high worriers are slow to make decisions. To the worrier all responses look like they may not be the right decisions. Hesitant of making a mistake, they choose to delay the decision as much as possible. This tendency to put off or completely avoid an activity that is potentially under one's control, leads to procrastination.

At this point, it is important to recognize that we all carry some baggage around with us from our upbringings and we all worry to different degrees. The question, though, is whether our worrying is healthy and adaptive or unhealthy and maladaptive.

**The way to tell which worrying you have, is to ask yourself the following questions:**

- ☛ Do you worry about things that are not real or immediate threats?
- ☛ Are you more anxious than relaxed?

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- ☛ Are you more unhappy than happy?
- ☛ Do you have difficulty enjoying yourself because you worry so much?
- ☛ Are you unwilling to take reasonable risks?
- ☛ Do your worries interfere with your normal activities?

If you answered 'no' to the above questions, then you're likely a healthy worrier, so keep doing what you're doing because you'll be sensitive to real threats, do what is reasonable to live a happy life, and you won't drive yourself crazy. However, if you responded 'yes' to the questions, then you are probably an unhealthy worrier and you'll want to take some steps to relieve yourself of that unnecessary burden.

The best place to start is to address the cause of your worrying. If you can figure out what precisely you are worrying about, then you're in a position to find a solution to the cause of your worrying. In the short term, you can also increase your awareness of what the most common sources of worry are for you (e.g., work, family, relationships). If you understand your worries, they can become less worrisome. You can also look for pre-emptive solutions to the causes of your worrying. For example, if you know you worry excessively about deadlines at work, you can better prepare for the deadlines and be sure to complete your work well in advance.

Paradoxically, worrying about worrying can itself cause the volume of your worrying to go up. You may believe that your constant worrying is harmful, that it's going to drive you crazy or affect your physical health. Or you may worry that you're going to lose all control over your worrying—that it will take over and never stop. You can make yourself even more miserable by thinking that you are the only one in the world who worries about the things you worry about. If you can accept that worrying is just a normal part of life and everyone does it, then you can keep the volume of your worrying to a more manageable level.

Sometimes there is no immediate solution to the worrying (e.g., waiting to hear whether you got a job you had applied for) and you just can't get your worrying out of your mind. In this case, the best strategy is to distract yourself the best you can from the worry. Whether reading a book, watching a movie, hanging out with friends, exercising, or what-

have-you, if you're focused on other activities, you're bound to worry less. Even better, if you can do things that produce an emotional experience diametrically opposed to worrying, namely, anything that makes you feel positive, happy, excited, or relaxed, you will counter the negativity and anxiety that accompanies worrying. This is no panacea, but it can provide you with a beneficial respite from your worries.

On the positive side, you may believe that your worrying helps you avoid bad things, prevents problems, prepares you for the worst, or leads to solutions. However, this can be just as damaging because it prevents you from breaking the worry habit. In order to stop worry and anxiety for good, you must give up your belief that worrying serves a positive purpose. Once you realize that worrying is the problem, not the solution, you can regain control of your worried mind.

However, if after all this, you still continue to worry, then it is possible that your worrying is part of a far more serious mental health issue such as depression, anxiety, or obsession. Studies show that there is a considerable overlap between worry and anxiety, worry and depression, and worry and obsession. In the last issue, we saw how to identify depression. In the forthcoming issues we shall see how to identify and differentiate between anxiety and obsession.

**Tips to handle worrying:**

- ☛ Create a "worry period." 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, **MUST** be a worry-free zone.

- ☛ Postpone your worry. If an anxious thought or worry comes into your head during the day, make a brief note of it on paper and postpone it to your worry period. Remind yourself that you'll have time to think about it later, so there's no need to worry about it right now. Save it for later and continue to go about your day.

- ☛ Go over your "worry list" during the worry period. Reflect on the worries you wrote down during the day. If the thoughts are still bothering you, allow yourself to worry

about them, but only for the amount of time you've specified for your worry period. If the worries don't seem important any more, cut your worry period short and enjoy the rest of your day.

- ☛ Ask yourself if the problem is solvable. Is the problem something you're currently facing, rather than an imaginary what-if? If the problem is an imaginary what-if, how likely is it to happen? Is your concern realistic? Can you do something about the problem or prepare for it, or is it out of your control? If the worry is solvable, start brainstorming. Make a list of all the possible solutions you can think of. Try not to 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 worried.

- ☛ Accept uncertainty. If after all the above, the problem looks unsolvable, accept that there is no solution to EVERY problem. Ask yourself, "Is it possible to live with a negative outcome?" and "If the outcome is negative, how best can I readjust my life to live with it?"

- ☛ Practice mindfulness. Close your eyes. Acknowledge and observe your anxious thoughts and feelings. 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. Notice that when you don't try to control the anxious thoughts that pop up, they soon pass, like clouds moving across the sky. Let your worries go. If you find that you are getting stuck, shift your thoughts to the way your body feels, the rhythm of your breathing, your ever-changing emotions, and then return to the thoughts that drift across your mind, and let them go. If you find yourself getting stuck repeat the process till you are finally able to let the thought go.

