

Are You a Chronic Worrier?

Everybody worries sometimes. Worry is a natural, cognitive warning process. When a perceived danger is realistic (a lump in your breast), and worry prompts you to take action (call the doctor!), worry is not only natural, it's productive - even lifesaving. Which is probably why our brains have a worry circuit. But for some of us, the circuit never shuts off.

How about you?

- Do you worry about events that are unlikely to happen?
- Do you exaggerate possible negative consequences?
- Do you equate worrying with caring?
- Can you remember a time you weren't worried?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you're likely a chronic worrier. For you and many others, worry is not a coping mechanism, it's destructive.

So what?

- The repercussions of chronic worry are unpleasant, even unhealthy.
- Chronic worriers can suffer from headaches, digestive problems, insomnia, and depression.
- Some doctors believe chronic worry and its accompanying stress decrease resistance to infections and increase susceptibility to immune disorders, like some cancers.
- Constant worry certainly reduces the worrier's quality of life, making it impossible to enjoy each day.

How did this happen to me?

- Some people have a predisposition to worry.
- Perfectionists, for example, expect the impossible of themselves and then worry that they can't achieve their expectations.
- People who feel vulnerable or insecure often worry because they don't feel empowered to do anything else.
- If a parent or other close adult models chronic worry, a child may emulate the behavior into adulthood without learning more productive ways to cope.
- A dreaded situation that turns out all right may reinforce worrying behavior. Worry becomes the lucky charm that guarantees a good outcome.
- A candidate for chronic worry is someone who wants an event, or life, to turn out in a very specific way. The more limits you place on what will make you happy, the bigger the chance you'll be disappointed. A perfect setup for worry.
- Chronic worry is a habit. Once you've begun relying on worry to get you through difficult situations, it becomes automatic-like driving a car along a familiar route. You may be so comfortable with the discomfort of worry that you forget what it feels like to be carefree!

So, how to stop?

The good news is that, because chronic worry is a habit, you can unlearn it and replace it with more helpful and healthful habits. Here are some suggestions:

- Listen to and change your "self-talk." Worriers bombard themselves with negative thoughts. Be conscious of your self-talk. When it's negative, consciously say, "Stop!" Then think-or, better yet, do something positive.
- Envision positive, realistic outcomes. Imagery is as powerful as self-talk.
- Put your worries in perspective. Ask yourself, "Will it matter in a year?"
- Remind yourself that there is no single right outcome. The adage, "When one door closes, another opens" is a worthwhile philosophy for chasing away unnecessary worries.
- Talk to a counselor. Don't let worries get in the way of your health, happiness and success.