

OVERCOMING ANXIETY – 4 DEALING WITH WORRIES

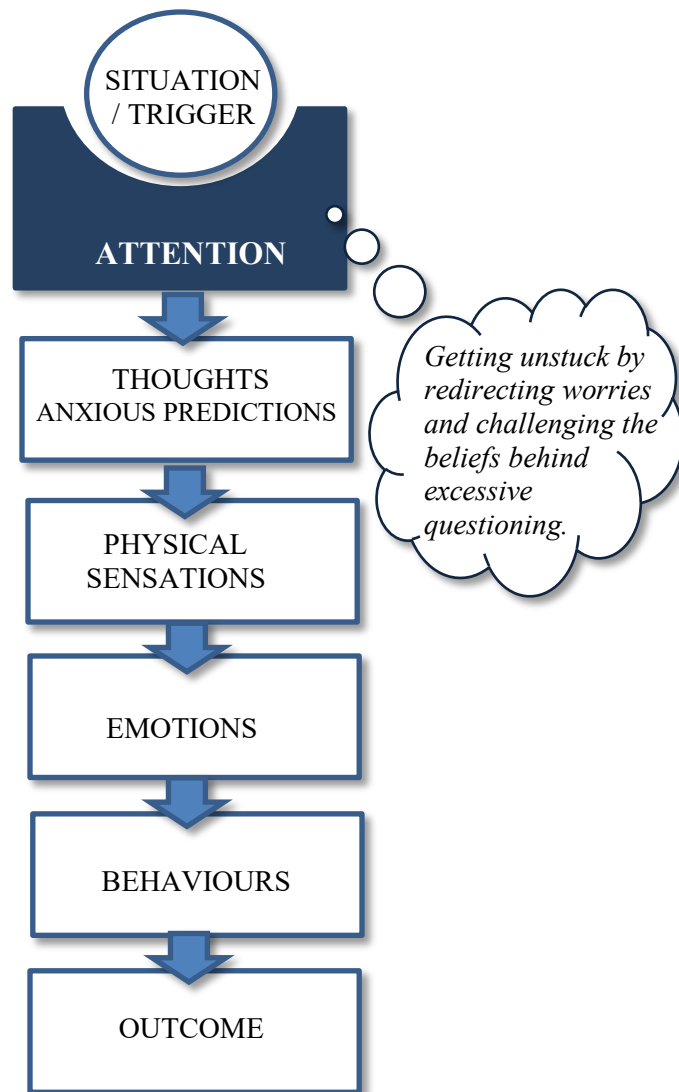


Figure 1: BUILDING BLOCKS OF ANXIETY

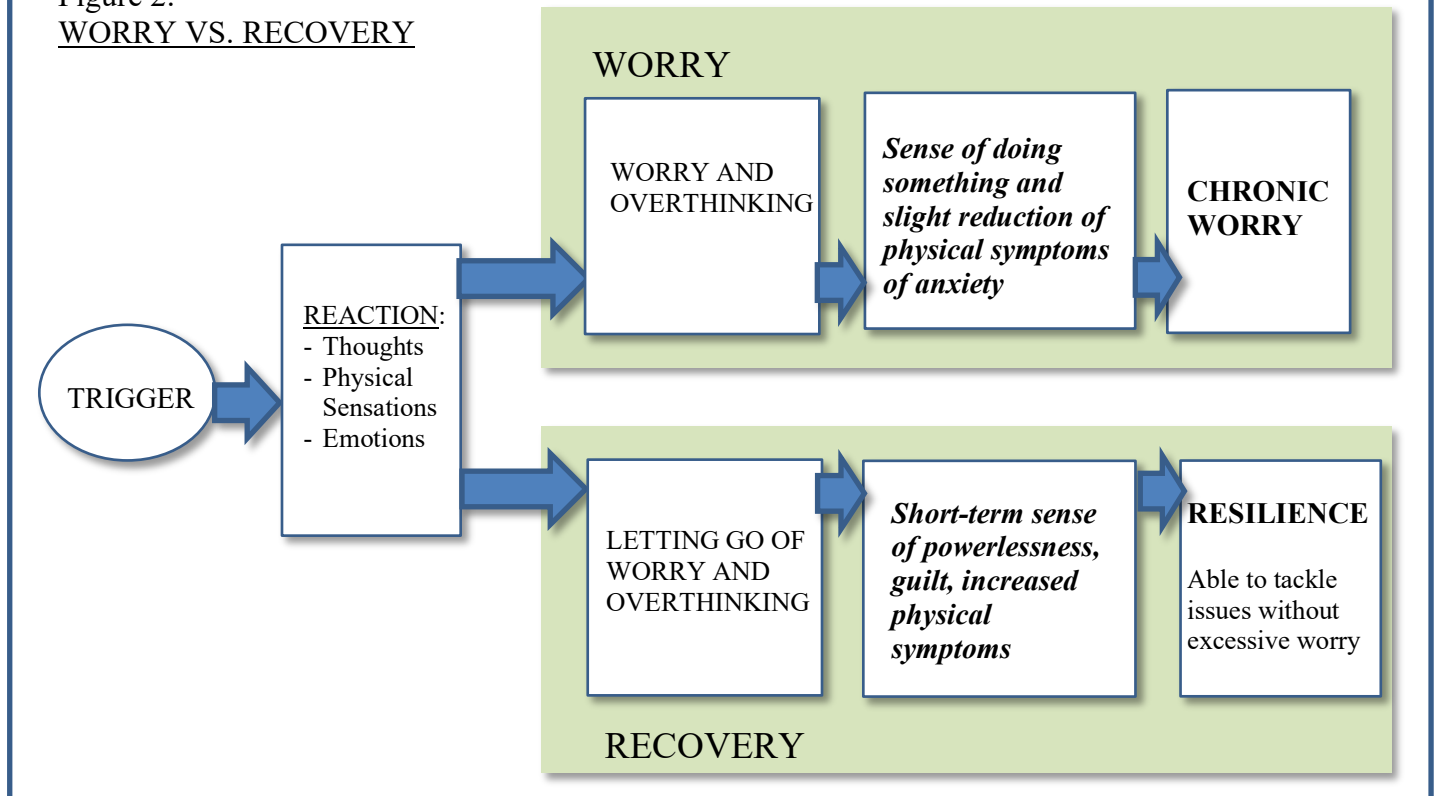
There is a new component in our model of anxiety: attention. When we worry, our attention is stuck on our worries. We become acutely aware of every potentially worrisome aspect of our experiences. A person who is worried about their health becomes preoccupied with changes in their heart rate. The fact that they have had similar experiences in the past without any ill consequences turns irrelevant. Someone who is concerned with criticism scans facial expressions. Neutral facial expressions are seen as indications of rejection. The moment a worrier asks a “what if” question, they become stuck in a loop of compulsive questioning. Worriers are especially vulnerable to any hint of uncertainty (e.g., waiting for results of medical tests, waiting to hear back after a job interview, making decisions without having a 100% clarity that one option is superior to other, etc.).

Disengagement from worrying requires a multistep approach that can be summarized by the acronym APPLE. APPLE stands for: (1) Acknowledge presence of worries without trying to suppress them, (2) Perspective, (3) Plan and Problem Solve, (4) Let go until there is an opportunity to implement your plan, and (5) Effective Engagement (see the cutout section on page 2).

We cannot just distract or stop ourselves from thinking certain things – see what happens when you close your eyes and try not to think of a green apple.

Our worries are often kept in place (conditioned) by our physical reactions. That means that even though rationally we know that our worrying does not make sense, attempts to let go of worrying often result in our gut making us feel uncomfortable, as if something is missing. Imagine that someone you care about is stuck on a highway in terrible road conditions. Is your worrying keeping them safe? Chances are that you know that this is not the case. However, have you noticed what happens when you try not to worry in such circumstances? Chances are that you are going to needlessly criticize yourself for being an uncaring person (see Figure 2 on page 2).

Figure 2:
WORRY VS. RECOVERY



Acknowledge presence of worries.

Gain Perspective

- Use Gaining Perspective Worksheet
- Ask yourself if what you worry about is happening now and identify aspects of the situation that are within your control

Plan and Problem-Solve

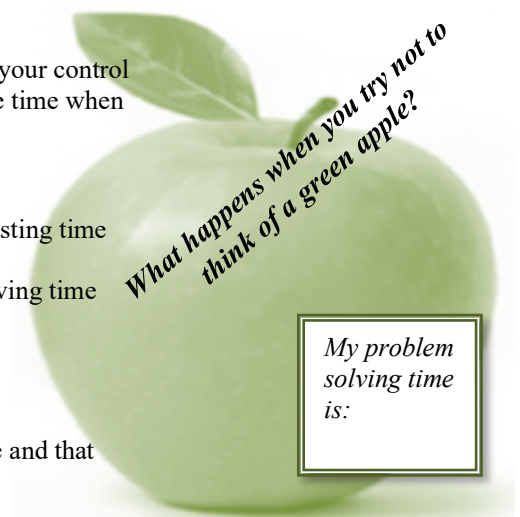
- Plan how to deal with aspects of the situation that are within your control
- Implement as much of your plan as you can or let go until the time when action is required.

Let go

- Let go of aspects that are not within your control. No use wasting time on something that you cannot change.
- Postpone your planning until your prescheduled problem-solving time
- Practice post-poned the worry technique

Effective Engagement

- Implement and evaluate your action plan as soon as possible
- Notice if you are able to get more productive worry-free time and that *worrying is not doing*.



EXAMPLES OF ASSUMPTIONS THAT KEEP WORRIES IN PLACE

□ WHEN I WORRY AT LEAST I AM DOING SOMETHING (THOUGHT ACTION FUSION)

- Worrying **FEELS** like you are doing something simply because it is energy consuming and usually focussed on a specific problem. However, worrying is **NOT** doing.
- Sometimes it is extremely difficult to accept helplessness. Since worrying creates the sense of action, it also leads to a belief that the worrier is not only doing something but also has not given up and has at least some control over what is happening.
- Worry is exhausting and yet nothing gets accomplished. So, worry leads to learnt helplessness because after all you are spending so much energy on a specific problem and yet nothing changes. Paradoxically people who tend to worry do so to combat a sense of helplessness and retain control.

□ WORRYING IS CARING

- We are obviously more emotionally involved in lives of people that we care about so worrying about them came to imply caring. This is reflected in everyday conversations when good friends greet each other by saying “*I worried so much about you*”
- People often feel a sense of guilt when they try to stop worrying. Guilt implies that not worrying is somehow wrong.
- Yet worrying is not caring. Caring is about being warm and welcoming and about being able to do what is needed to assist the person that we care about. Yet many worriers end up by being short and abrupt with objects of their worries and accuse their loved ones of causing them unneeded distress. Many worriers are simply not able to offer the assistance that might be crucial at the time because they get too anxious.

□ WORRYING HELPS ME STAY PREPARED

- We react more to rapid changes in perceived level of stress than to gradual changes. A relaxed person who is faced with sudden stress notices the change in stress levels more than someone who has been already tense. In other words, if you are on a lookout for danger, you are not going to startle when you notice that something is off, but you will remain on “guard duty “for life.

□ WORRYING MOTIVATES ME

- Worrying creates restless energy and in some, creates an urge to move. When contrasted with apathy, this might feel like an increase in motivation. This restless energy is seldom productive and really does not feel very pleasant. We become motivated by our desire to get rid of this discomfort and not by a desire to solve problems or achieve something specific.

□ “WHAT IF” QUESTIONING WILL EVENTUALLY PROVIDE ANSWERS

- In initial stages worry resembles planning and it is possible to answer the first few “what if” questions. For example “what if I will be late” is followed by “I will call to let them know”, “what if they cannot see me today because I am late” is followed by

“I will reschedule”, “what if they won’t reschedule” is followed by “I will plea my case”, “what if that does not work” is followed by..... Yet the reality is that none of these things have happened, and no new conclusions can be derived in absence of new data.

□ WORRYING IS NOT CONTROLLABLE

- Trying to stop a thought never works. Imagine that you are trying very hard to stop thinking of a green apple. When you do so, green apple will remain on your mind. In other words, the more the person tries not to think of something, the more preoccupied they get.
- Worries are actually controllable by building an ability to focus on what we decide is useful for us to focus on and by recognizing that worrying is useless. I would go a step further and stress that important things in life are too important for us to worry about them. These things need to be addressed head on. There is a difference between worrying about an exam and studying for an exam, and between worrying about a hospitalized relative and making an effort to visit and support them.
- There are many examples of successful resolution of worries. Think of situations in which you have worried about something quite specific then you have learnt that this is no longer an issue (e.g., you got an influx of cash when worrying about your finances). If worry were not controllable, you should continue to worry despite change in your circumstances. Moreover, you have worried about something that was not that significant and ended up by being faced with a true emergency. If worry were not controllable, you should not be able to deal with the emergency at all and remain preoccupied with whatever you were initially preoccupied with. Yet most worriers are able to switch focus.

DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN SOLVABLE AND UNSOLVABLE WORRIES.

Solvable worries refer to difficulties that are happening in here and now and that you have some control over. These issues need to be addressed as otherwise we end up with even more difficult problems on our plate. Unsolvable worries are concerns about terrible things that might or might not happen in the future that we have no control over in present moment. Use the table below to help you differentiate between solvable and unsolvable worries.

SOLVABLE WORRIES: <i>Use problem solving worksheet and then let go until you can implement your plan.</i>	UNSOLVABLE WORRIES: <i>Redirect attention to something useful by reminding yourself that worrying is not doing.</i>
Examples: "Phone and gas bills are due and I need to find a way to pay or get an extension" "I have too many tasks to finish at work" "I had a fight with my partner."	Examples: "My loved one might have an accident". "My child might join a wrong crowd when they get older." "I might become seriously ill". "Something really bad might happen"

PROBLEM SOLVING WORKSHEET

A: IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM

Write down what the problem is. Make sure you are focusing on one issue at a time and it is not an unsolvable worry.

B: PLAN

List possible action steps that you can take to address this problem and identify how such actions will assist with problem solving.

Action Steps	How are these helpful?

C: IMPLEMENT

Organize your plan by removing unhelpful action steps and deciding who is doing what and when.

Action step	Who?	When?

D: EVALUATE AND ADJUST

Make sure to implement the plan even if you are not 100% sure of its effectiveness. Then evaluate the outcome by asking following questions:

1. Was I able to get what I needed?

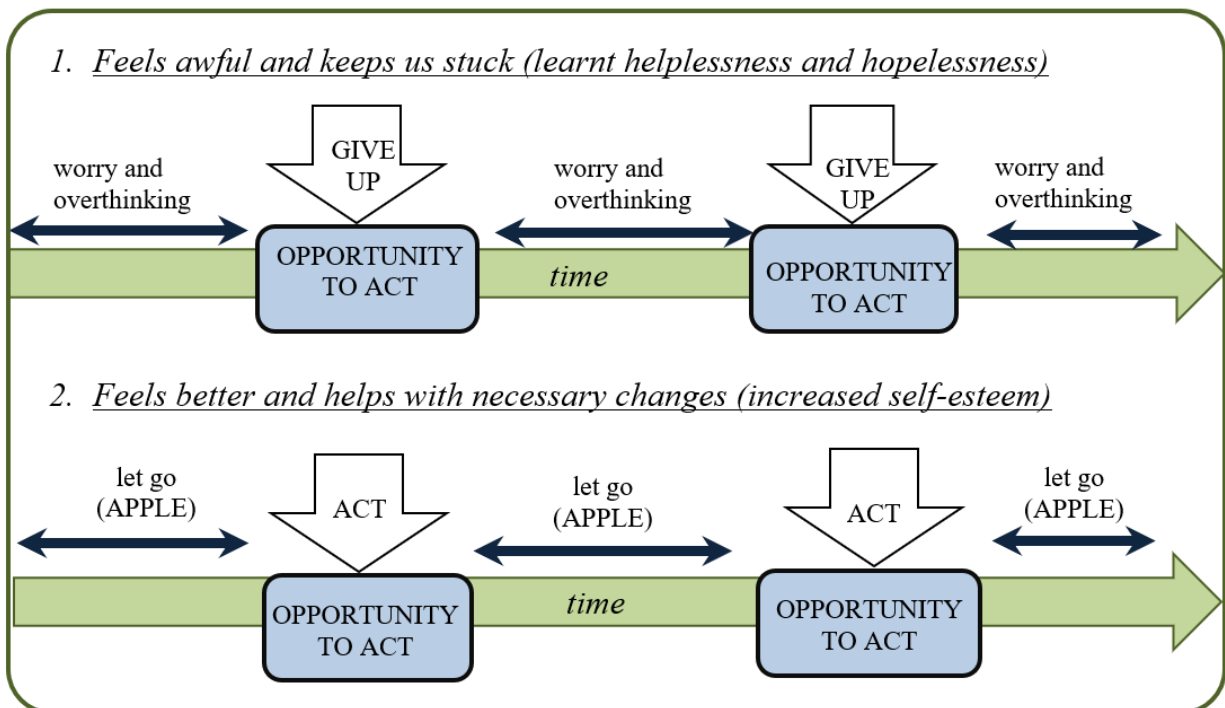
2. Did the issue get better or worse as a result of these action steps?

3. Does the plan need tweaking?

4. Do I still have some things left to do?

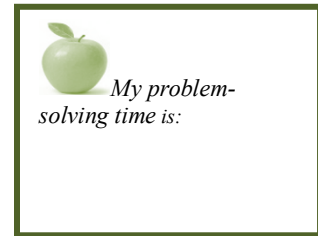
5. What will I do in the future when I encounter similar circumstances?

LEARNING TO LET GO



The diagram above shows two very different ways of reacting. The middle arrow represents time and moments in time when we have an opportunity to do something about what we worry about. The top diagram corresponds to a mindset of someone with chronic worries. Such persons have very hard time disengaging from their problems but also have hard time doing what is needed when presented with opportunity to do something. They are usually too tired from their own worries. The bottom represents a mindset of someone who has learnt to control their worries. This person is able to do what is needed at the time when they have an opportunity to do so and not to get overcome with worries at the times when there is nothing that they need or can do. Remember: ***letting go is not the same as giving up.***

POSTPONE THE WORRY TECHNIQUE



1. Set aside about one hour each day to review your worries and to develop plans to solve any of specific problems that you might have identified. It is pretty much impossible to stop our thoughts – remember trying not to think of the green apple. However, it is possible for us to postpone thinking about things. Make sure that when you “worry time” comes, you actually use it to review your concerns and strategize as needed. The technique will not work if you don’t follow through.
2. Throughout the day, make a list of your worries. You can do so on paper or record it as a voice memo on your phone. Each time a worry comes, make a note of it and then tell yourself that you will give it its due when the time comes.
3. Once your scheduled time comes, sort your worries into problems to be solved and unsolvable worries.
4. First focus on solvable problems. Rank them in order of priority. If necessary use the Problem-Solving Worksheet. Try to cap your “worry time” to one hour per day – after one month you will have 30 hours of solid strategizing and plans for some of the important aspects of your life.
5. When observing your unsolvable worries, notice that these things are not within your control and that worrying will not have any impact. Ask yourself what would you be doing with your time and engage in that task. We are not asking you to ignore what is important but we are asking you not to engage in a useless mental process.

LET’S EXPERIMENT

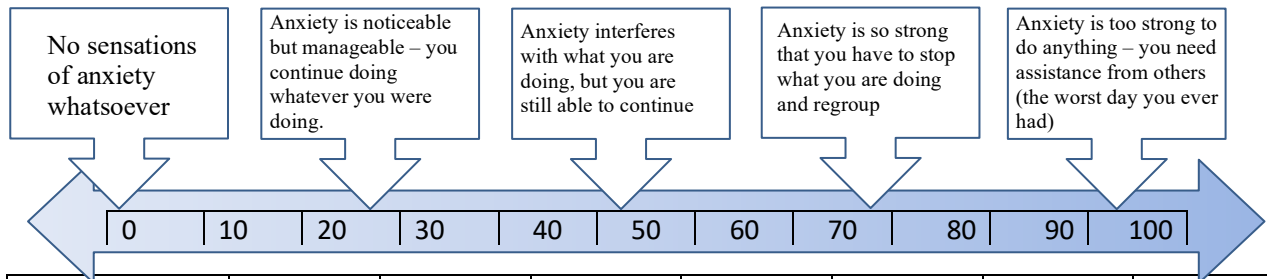
Problem-solving is useful but worrying is not. Worrying is not. Other than making you feel awful, worrying will stop problems from happening or cause problems to appear from the thin air. The same is true of not worrying. ***There is absolutely no association between worrying, not worrying and fate.*** You can prove that point by using the table on page 8 to track what happens when you practice postpone-the-worry technique.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE PRACTICE POSTPONING OUR WORRIES?

Date:	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
What were the worries you have notice throughout the day? Circle solvable worries.							
Did you use your thinking time to develop plans to deal with solvable worries?							
When was your thinking time? (keep it as regular as possible)							
Did any of your worries pertain to anything happening on the day when you experienced your worries?							
Did anything bad happen, now that you are giving less attention to your worries?							
How long were you able to postpone your worries for?							

We hope to show that worrying has no positive impact on our life. Unfortunately, not worrying will not right away bring positive impact either. However not worrying will free more time for us to do what works and will allow us to be more present in our lives (notice opportunities, notice simple pleasures, feel less restlessness)

KEEPING TRACK AND KEEPING HONEST



DATE:								
Rate the intensity of your overall anxiety throughout the day using the scale above and mark it on the graph.	100							
	90							
	80							
	70							
	60							
	50							
	40							
	30							
	20							
	10							
0								
What challenges / stresses were you faced with today?								
What skill have you practiced?	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry or APPLE) <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry or APPLE <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry or APPLE <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry or APPLE <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry or APPLE <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry or APPLE <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry or APPLE <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving	<input type="checkbox"/> Postpone the worry or APPLE <input type="checkbox"/> Gaining Perspective <input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving
What were you able to accomplish during the day?								
How much time was spent on worrying?								
How much time was spent on doing something proactive (problem solving, taking action steps)?								