

## How Worry Works

Worry involves repeatedly scanning for, thinking about and predicting negative future situations or events. When we worry, we focus on the potential threats or risks associated with hypothetical situations or events and we tend to prepare for the worst. This “better to be safe than sorry” way of thinking leads to high levels of anxiety, interferes with rational problem solving and limits our ability to think creatively and productively about the potential solution.

Although we tend to assume that worry means that we are attending to the problem, statistical analysis shows that worry does not change the outcome and increases our intolerance of uncertainty. Research into worry has demonstrated that approximately 85% of the things we worry about never actually happen. Of the remaining 15%, approximately 11% of outcomes are less severe than predicted. This leaves approximately 4% where worrying does not change the outcome. By continuously worrying about negative things that typically do not happen, we prevent the disconfirmation of our negative predictions and increase our reliance on worry as a proxy for problem solving.

So why do we worry? The answer is rooted in the evolution of the human brain. Early humans were evolved to continuously focus on potential risks and threats from their environment. This included risk of physical attack and starvation. Although modern humans do not typically face the same physical threats to safety and survival, the same brain circuitry can be activated by perceived threats to identity, reputation, social judgements, loss of control and uncertainty. We can activate this hypervigilant mode of thinking by overanalysing and amplifying hypothetical negative interpretations.

The key to interrupting worry is to notice this primitive alarm system and switch to either problem solving where the outcome can be influenced or letting go where it is hypothetical or outside our control.

## Exercise 33 Worry – Thinking Time

Start by setting a regular daily time aside as a dedicated worry-thinking time. e.g. 4:30pm (not just before going to bed). Once you have identified your daily worry-thinking time, use the following two-part exercise to capture, suspend and manage worrying

### Part 1 – Worry Suspension

What is the specific worry?	
What consequences am I predicting?	
What distressing feelings am I experiencing (Rate 0-10)	
What time am I suspending this worry for later consideration? (00:00:00)	

### Part 2 – Worry - Thinking Time

What is the hard evidence supporting my predicted worry?	
What is the hard evidence against my predicted worry?	
What is the worst that could happen?	
What is the best that could happen?	
What is the most likely / realistic outcome?	
What are the consequences of worrying about this?	
What is a helpful way of thinking about this; what would I say to a friend?	
Can I trust myself to let go of this worry now?	<i>Yes – Rerate worry 0-10 No – Continue to next questions</i>
What practical problem-solving options are open to me?	
What is the most helpful / effective course of action?	
What, where, who and when?	
How have my thoughts about the initial worry changed?	
How distressing is this issue now? (Re-rate 0-10)	