

## Dealing With Worry and Rumination

"Worry gives a small thing a big shadow." (Swedish proverb)

"Worry is a special form of fear. To create worry, humans elongate fear with anticipation and memory, expand it in imagination, and fuel it with emotion. Worry is what humans do with simple fear once it reaches the cerebral cortex. They make it complex."

"Worry = vulnerability + powerlessness"  
(Edward Hallowell)

"Your brain is not your friend." (Steven Hayes)

Our lower brain emotional centers and our verbally driven cerebral cortex did not evolve to issue warm and fuzzy thoughts—they are overly sensitive alarm systems!

Questions to ask yourself:

What is the difference between "good" (adaptive) worry vs. "bad" (maladaptive) worry?

How much worry is a natural part of living versus how often do we needlessly torment ourselves?

How often has your worry actually saved you from something?

Most worriers are not passively beset by worry. Although they may not realize it, most actively seek worry. Rumination is persistent and repetitive worry. (The word "rumination" describes what a cow does when "chewing its cud" or chewing, swallowing, regurgitating and then chewing it again—a well chosen word to describe the worry process.)

The neurophysiology of worry:

Primitive emotional centers in our brain (e.g., the amygdala) react to potential danger by transmitting an alarm to the area of our brain behind and above our eyes (the prefrontal cortex). The prefrontal cortex analyzes the alarm (worrying, essentially) which

signals further alarm back to the amygdala. Picture a vicious cycle of escalating and self-perpetuating alarm and worry between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex and you have a simplified understanding of the brain's role in worry. Other parts of the brain contribute, too. For example, the cingulate cortex seems to be overly active among ruminating worriers and may be dampened by appropriate medication (SRIs).

Nature versus nurture:

Is your "worry quotient" as immutable as your height or your eye color? Might nature provide the "hardware" and life experience provide the "software" of worry? Although nature might impose a range, corrective experience may determine where in that range someone usually functions. Excessive worry should not be seen

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Neuroticism: A worrier's temperament?

Worriers were often conscientious, inhibited and highly sensitive children characterized by high and inflexible autonomic reactivity. (Autonomic reactivity = hyperarousal, hypervigilance, and slowness to habituate.) Studies of fetus' and infants' heart rates and their responses to stimuli suggest that the underpinnings for excessive worry are probably "hardwired." Remind yourself not to hold yourself responsible for your "wiring" even though you strive to take responsibility for managing worry differently.

Typical beliefs and assumptions that fuel worry:

Intolerance for uncertainty.

Intolerance for discomfort.

Inflated sense of responsibility and culpability.

Distorted risk assessment.

Perfectionism—mistakes are unacceptable.

Thoughts are overvalued,

(e.g., “Because I have a thought, it is, therefore, an important thought, and I must give it my full attention and get it settled.”)

Worry is overvalued,

(e.g., “Worry prevents bad things from happening,” “Worry shows how deeply I care about my children,” “Worry keeps me focused and steeled for the worst so I can’t be blindsided,” “I can anticipate and avoid discomfort by worrying.”)

“Meta-worry” or worry about worrying,

(e.g., “I’m making myself sick,” “I’m going to bring on an early heart attack,” “I’m out of control,” “I’m weak.”)

The limits of reassurance: If reassurance doesn’t work the first time, it’s probably not going to work so don’t keep trying to make it work. The temporary relief you feel when reassured simply sets up your next need for reassurance. Plus, when you go looking for reassurance enough, you will usually uncover something new to worry about!

The limits of worry suppression: What we resist persists.