

Why Worry?

Worrying is a very strange behaviour. It is hard to see what benefit it gives the worrier, or what keeps the behaviour going. Surely worriers can see that they are just making themselves unhappy to no great benefit?

Psychotherapists used to encourage worriers to rationally evaluate the likelihood of feared events occurring and point out that, even if what they feared would happen did happen, it probably wouldn't be as bad as they seemed to think. However worriers then tend to just find something else to worry about. More recently we have realised that what keeps worriers worrying are their beliefs or meta-cognitions about worrying itself.

Worriers often believe that worrying is useful. They confuse worrying with problem solving. Problem solving thinking develops and promotes action. Worrying is repetitive and just produces anxiety. Other worriers believe their worrying is out of control because they cannot seem to stop it. Of course, the more one tries not to do a mental activity, the more it happens. Try thinking of blue mice with spectacles and you'll see what I mean.

Worriers often think that the fact they worry shows that they are nice people. They imagine that anyone who doesn't worry must be callous or complacent. A similar belief is the idea that worrying keeps you safe. People who think this believe that by worrying they are able to foresee dangers and so avoid them. They appear not to notice that non-worriers seem to survive without recourse to this strategy.

A surprising number of worriers believe that their thoughts have some sort of magical power. They believe that the activity of worrying keeps themselves and those they love safe all by itself. For example people believe that if they worry about their partner being in a road accident this will somehow prevent such a thing happening.

Of course, meta-cognitions are not things we discuss, and often we don't even notice we have these beliefs until someone asks us.

Most of us worry some of the time. It may be that the problem for worriers is not that they have worrying thoughts, but rather that they pay attention to them and give them weight when the rest of us just ignore them.

Monitoring our worrying thoughts, and then either arguing against them or simply directing our attention to more productive mental activity are simple, effective strategies for bringing worry under control.

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Responses to this article are warmly welcomed.