

# What's the use of worrying? Strategies for breaking the worry habit

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My life has been full of terrible misfortunes,  
most of which have never happened.

Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592)

Worry has been described as an attempt to engage in mental problem-solving on an issue whose outcome is uncertain. We think about bad things that could happen and how we might respond to them if they should occur. People worry about all sorts of things, including the possibility of physical harm, rejection or disapproval by others, failure, loss, harm to loved ones or simply not coping with future demands. Everyone worries at times, and if it happens occasionally and is focused on a real problem that has arisen, it may even be helpful. Indeed worry can have benefits – it motivates us to solve problems, and so may help us to overcome specific difficulties.

Worry only becomes a burden if we do it excessively and without reasonable cause. For instance, we may find ourselves imagining all sorts of worst-case scenarios, and then thinking about all the ways that we might deal with those situations if they should occur. If we worry too readily the process is distracting and unhelpful, and we feel bad much of the time. Excessive worry creates

anxiety, with all of its associated unpleasant features, such as tension, arousal, poor concentration, sleep disturbances and feelings of apprehension and distress. In this chapter we will look at various factors that contribute to unnecessary worry, and explore some specific strategies that can help us to break the worry habit.

### ***Anxiety versus worry***

When we worry we usually also feel anxious; however, worry and anxiety are not the same thing. *Anxiety* is our automatic response to a perceived threat. It is an instinctive response which is accompanied by *physical changes* that put us in a state of readiness for action. These changes include muscle tension, physical arousal (increased heart rate, breathing rate and oxygen consumption) and heightened focus on the perceived threat. *Worry*, on the other hand, is a *thought process* that involves contemplating bad things that could happen. Worry may motivate us to explore solutions and take action towards resolving a problem. However, worry may also cause us to embark on extended analysis, cogitation, and search for solutions for scenarios that are unlikely to occur.

### ***Worry can be useful***

Sometimes the object of our worry requires attention. For example, you might be worrying about approaching exams, which might be a reasonable concern if you have not done much studying. Or, you might be worried about growing financial pressures because you are living beyond your means, or about relationship tensions with someone at work that are causing you to feel bad.

In situations such as these, worry may motivate you to find solutions. Recognising issues that genuinely require attention and looking for solutions can be an appropriate way to respond. For example, worrying about exams may motivate you to create a study schedule and perhaps temporarily give up leisure activities in order to focus on studying. Worry about financial pressures may motivate you to create a budget, take out a loan or take some cost-cutting measures (like selling your car and using public transport). A

problematic relationship may be addressed by initiating an honest conversation with the person (perhaps reading about effective communication strategies first or getting assistance from a friend or mediator).

### ***Some people are predisposed to worry***

Some people are more likely to worry because they have an anxious disposition. People with this personality style are more likely to develop anxiety-related problems such as worrying, panic attacks and phobias. The trait is influenced by both genes and life experiences (about 50% each). For example, very stressful or traumatic life events can contribute towards an anxious temperament, particularly if they occur early in our lives. In addition, children whose parents were themselves very anxious, or who were unpredictable, critical, absent or abusive may also be more prone to anxiety. Finally, the things we do to try to keep ourselves safe frequently perpetuate anxiety and worry. As we will see later in this chapter, people who are anxious by nature also tend to use excessive avoidance and safety behaviours that can actually make us more anxious over time.

### ***Habitual worrying***

While occasional worrying is normal and appropriate, habitual worry carries many disadvantages. It makes us feel anxious much of the time, which gives rise to unpleasant symptoms such as muscle tension, arousal, twitches, headaches, nausea, dizziness and difficulty sleeping. High levels of anxiety cause physical exhaustion, and for this reason people who worry excessively often complain about being tired, even when they have done very little. Because their mind is frequently focused on things that could go wrong, they are often distracted from what is happening in the present moment. Consequently they are more prone to making errors, forgetting things and missing things that are happening around them. Because excessive worry robs us of the ability to appreciate the present moment, it stops us from being happy and being able to enjoy our lives.

*Intolerance of uncertainty*

Those of us who worry excessively are often said to be intolerant of uncertainty. The possibility that bad things could happen makes us uncomfortable, so we attempt to prevent uncertainty by trying to consider every negative contingency. Worry creates the illusion of control; however, it does not give us the certainty we are seeking — we never feel reassured. In fact, there is no benefit in anticipating unlikely negative scenarios, and doing so creates far more problems than it solves.

Focusing on possible threats produces a negative bias in our thinking. This means that we are more likely to perceive normal events as potentially dangerous, and to jump to negative conclusions when there is no reason to do so. For example, if someone doesn't respond to our email or text message we might perceive it as a personal rejection rather than an oversight; if we are running late for an appointment we may imagine all sorts of negative consequences; if we make a mistake at work, we are more likely to anticipate adverse outcomes, such as being perceived as incompetent, losing the respect of others or even losing our job.

Sometimes worrying may take the form of one worst case scenario triggering thoughts about another and another (referred to as 'catastrophic chaining'). For example, Stuart's teenage son Adam is going to a party on Saturday night. Stuart wonders if there will be drugs at the party, and then he starts to think about the possibility that Adam may end up taking drugs. After that Stuart imagines that the Adam could have a psychotic episode, as he had read that sometimes young people develop serious mental illness after taking drugs. After that Stuart starts to think about what it would be like if Adam were to develop a serious mental illness as a result of taking drugs — his life would be ruined.... From going to a birthday party, to a life destroyed by drugs, Stuart's worry habit very quickly takes him to catastrophic endings.

## Strategies for releasing the worry habit

Changing ways of thinking that have been with us for years or decades requires self-awareness and motivation. We will need to recognise the unhelpful habits that we have developed over the years, and the unconscious beliefs that support them. Finally, we need to learn strategies that can help to break established worry habits, and be willing to put these into practice. So let us start by first of all looking at some of the unhelpful habits that maintain habitual worrying.

### *Addressing unhelpful habits*

Those of us who perceive life to be full of dangers typically do things to try to protect ourselves. If we are confronted with real danger this may be appropriate. For example if we are sitting on a train and someone near us becomes very rowdy or aggressive, it might be a good idea to move to another carriage when the opportunity arises. If you find a lump in your breast or a suspicious looking mole on your skin, it is a good idea to see a doctor and get it checked out.

However, trying too hard to make sure we are safe all the time has major disadvantages. Although no situation is 100% risk free, many situations that we worry about are low risk. If you are perceiving danger in many situations, chances are the *danger is not real but imagined*. Running away or trying to protect yourself from low risk situations is counter-productive. Ultimately, what you need to address is *not the situations* you believe to be dangerous, *but the thinking style* that maintains perceptions of danger. If you keep running away from things you fear you never get the chance to discover that your fears are unfounded.

The strategies we use to make ourselves safe frequently become part of the problem, because they fuel further anxiety and worrying. The most common unhelpful strategies are *avoidance* and excessive *safety behaviours*. These behaviours include the actions that we take, as well as the more subtle mental strategies we engage in order to protect ourselves.

### *Avoidance*

People who are habitual worriers are great avoiders. As their world is full of imagined dangers, they are constantly trying to steer clear of situations that might put them at risk. For instance, they might try to avoid things like attending social situations if they are not certain that they will feel at ease there, watching television programs that deal with anxiety-provoking subjects, reading about things that increase their anxiety, going to places that make them feel uncomfortable, driving outside of familiar territory, making phone calls that make them feel awkward, trying new things or taking new risks.

They may find themselves *procrastinating* (another form of avoidance) about things they need to do because those things increase their anxiety. If they are particularly sensitive to the physical sensations associated with anxiety they might also try to avoid doing things that trigger physical arousal (the key symptom of anxiety), like brisk exercise, suspenseful movies or sexual activity. They might also avoid situations that give rise to other uncomfortable emotions such as sadness, anger or even feelings of excitement.

### *Excessive safety behaviours*

There are many other unnecessary safety behaviours that we resort to in order to protect ourselves. These might include things like trying to do things perfectly to avoid criticism, sitting next to the exit to allow for a quick escape, taking vitamin pills and unproven therapies, carrying water around and sipping frequently, taking a friend along when doing things that make us uncomfortable and even going to the toilet whenever the opportunity arises, just in case! It might also include making frequent calls to family members to make sure they are safe, repeatedly asking (or testing) a partner to check if they still love us, making repeated medical appointments to rule out the possibility of illness or researching our physical symptoms on the Internet (sometimes referred to as

'Consulting Dr Google' — which invariably causes us to worry more!).

While many safety behaviours involve actions, others involve *mental strategies*. For example, you might find yourself reviewing a recent event, looking for any evidence that you may have said the wrong thing, mentally monitoring your body sensations for possible signs of illness or planning solutions to imagined problems. Worry is itself a safety behaviour, as we are trying to anticipate bad things that could happen, and imagine how we might prevent them or resolve them if they should occur. Excessive analysing of various situations is also a common mental safety behaviour.

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### Common Safety Behaviours

#### Behavioural:

- Excessive attempts to be in control — self or others
- Avoiding feared situations
- Over-preparing
- Reassurance seeking behaviours
- Phone calls
- Perfectionism
- Checking
- Chronic busyness

#### Mental:

- Hypervigilance (vigilant monitoring of perceived threat)
- Worrying
- Checking
- Self-monitoring
- Analysing
- Planning solutions to imagined problems
- Trying not to think about unpleasant topics

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Although avoidance and safety behaviours are intended to reduce the risk of harm, they have several negative consequences. Most importantly, they maintain anxiety because they prevent us from learning that our fears are unjustified. In order to discover that our world is safe we need to relinquish excessive safety behaviours.

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### EXERCISE 1: Monitor your avoidance and safety behaviours

Get yourself a little pad that you can carry with you wherever you go. Each time you notice that you are avoiding something or engaging in a safety behaviour, jot it down in your pad. Continue for at least two weeks.

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Doing this exercise will make you more aware of how often you resort to avoidance and safety behaviours, and will therefore highlight specific behaviours that you can subsequently choose to address. Taking more risks and gradually relinquishing your safety behaviours will provide experiential learning that your world is safe, and most of the things you fear do not eventuate. In addition, you will learn that even if some things do eventuate, they rarely have catastrophic consequences, and in the end, you can cope. Paradoxically, the process of worrying creates far more suffering than the situations we fear.

As we have seen, avoidance and safety behaviours reflect our attempt to protect ourselves in what we perceive to be an unsafe world. However, if the problem is our thinking style rather than a dangerous world, how helpful are these behaviours? If our world is not inherently dangerous, do we really need to be making so much effort to keep ourselves safe?

While some people realise (at least on a rational level) that bad things are unlikely to happen, on a 'gut level' it feels like they might. There is only one way to discover that our high threat perceptions are incorrect, and that is to start dropping our avoidance and safety behaviours. This process is referred to as conducting behavioural experiments, because we deliberately change our usual behaviours and observe what happens as a result.

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## **EXERCISE 2: Conduct behavioural experiments**

If you have been keeping a record of your safety behaviours for two or more weeks, you will be aware of the many things that you do to try to protect yourself. So now comes the next important step: make a decision to deliberately drop as many safety behaviours as you can in the next two weeks, and observe the outcomes.

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The form on the next page provides a useful format for recording the safety behaviours that you would normally use, and the consequences of dropping them. You may be surprised at what you discover!

Challenging My Safety Behaviours	
Challenging behaviour: What I did to challenge my safety behaviours	Outcomes: What were the consequences?

The following is a sample of Kelly's behavioural experiments, as recorded on her form:

Challenging My Safety Behaviours	
Challenging behaviour: What I did to challenge my safety behaviours	Outcomes: What were the consequences?
<i>Had friends for dinner. Resisted the temptation to make an elaborate meal and clean the house for days beforehand. Made a simple meal.</i>	<i>People enjoyed themselves and no one seemed to notice that I had not scrubbed the house beforehand. The conversation was lively and the guests had a good time.</i>
<i>Answered the phone when it rang instead of the usual screening of calls in advance.</i>	<i>There was no problem with doing this.</i>
<i>Read my emails only once before sending them, instead of the usual four or five readings and editing.</i>	<i>No problem — it saved me quite a bit of time.</i>
<i>Resisted the urge to make a doctor's appointment to find out why my cheek gets red.</i>	<i>My cheek was red for a few days and then went away.</i>
<i>Drove to an appointment in an unfamiliar area without getting my boyfriend to drive me there.</i>	<i>I was anxious about driving there on my own but I found the place easily. It wasn't a problem.</i>
<i>Went to Toastmasters meeting, in spite of being terrified at the idea of public speaking.</i>	<i>I didn't do any public speaking, but decided to attend again. It was a good experience.</i>

Doing this exercise creates *experiential learning*. When we abandon our safety behaviours, we come to realise on a deeper level that it is safe to relinquish them. Consequently, we learn through direct experience that our world is not so dangerous after all.

‘But what if there are some negative consequences?’ you might be wondering to yourself. ‘Isn’t it better to be safe than sorry?’ It is true that we can not be 100% sure that negative outcomes will never occur (and remember that using safety behaviours does not guarantee that bad things will never happen). However, you will also discover that even on the rare occasions where negative outcomes do occur, you can cope with them much better than you realised. The world rarely falls apart, and life goes on, even if some things do not proceed as you had intended. You will also discover that resisting the urge to engage in frequent avoidance and safety behaviours will make you less fearful over time. This will enable you to develop a more balanced lifestyle, as well as a more healthy way of thinking.

Life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass,  
It’s about learning to dance in the rain.

## Worry awareness training

Our next step is to become very familiar with our own particular habit of worrying. Once again, we will need to monitor our habits, but this time it is our worry thoughts that we will be observing and recording. The following exercises build insight into the processes that maintain the urge to worry, and provide clues as to how they can be relinquished.

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### EXERCISE 3: The Worry Thoughts Log

A good way to become aware of our worry habit is to keep a log of our worry thoughts for a period of at least two weeks. Keep a little pad in your pocket or bag, and briefly jot down any worry thoughts that pop into your mind as soon as you notice them (just a few words to remind you what you were worrying about). Each evening, review the thoughts that you recorded, and label each as either ‘CP’ (which stands for ‘Current Problem’) or ‘WI?’ (which stands for ‘What If?’). CP thoughts relate to real problems that have arisen, or are definitely about to arise. WI? thoughts are speculative – the problem has not occurred, but you are worrying that it might.

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Doing this exercise has a number of benefits. Many people are surprised or even shocked to discover how frequently their mind goes to worry thoughts in the course of a typical day. They also discover that much of their worrying is speculative — they are worrying that something bad could happen. While we already knew that worrying does not protect us, doing this exercise can help us to see this on a deeper level. Speculative worries have no benefits at all.

During the evening review of our Worries Log it is easier to see our recorded thoughts in perspective. As the emotions connected with those thoughts when they entered our mind have subsided, many of our recorded worries now seem trivial or implausible. Separating pointless speculations from worries that relate to current problems can help us to focus on issues that we might be able to resolve.

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**EXERCISE 4: Explore problem-solving if appropriate**

Looking at the issues you identified as CP (current problems), the next question to ask yourself is: 'Does this still matter?' Interestingly, many issues that seemed important earlier in the day now seem unimportant. However, if there are some issues there that really do matter, the next question to ask is: 'Can I do something about it?' Identify those issues that may be worthy of problem-solving.

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***Distinguish between what is within your control and what is beyond it***

Some of the issues we worry about can be resolved — partially or completely. These may be worthy of our attention, and exploring solutions can help us to resolve particular problems. There are other issues that are completely beyond our control. As worrying will not make the slightest difference to their outcome, the best thing we can do is let them go. The following table provides examples of worry topics that may be within your control, versus those that are not.

Amenable to problem-solving	Not amenable to problem-solving
<i>I am worried that I may have inadvertently offended a friend.</i>	<i>I am worried about my daughter's safety while she is travelling overseas.</i>
<i>I have to give a presentation to my class and am worried that I won't do a good job.</i>	<i>I am worried that I may not like the people at my new job.</i>
<i>I put on 4 kg over the Christmas period, and am worried that I may not lose it.</i>	<i>I am worried that my mum will die one day, and I will not be able to cope.</i>
<i>I am worried about the large number of jobs that I have to get through at work.</i>	<i>I am worried that the stock market could crash again, and it could affect my savings.</i>

### ***Problem-solve for situations that matter and that are within your control***

Problem-solving may be appropriate when we are faced with significant problems that we can do something about. It may involve brainstorming various possible solutions and implementing those that we think are most likely to be effective. Sometimes the solutions are obvious, and we just need to go ahead and do what needs to be done (for example, worrying about coming exams or an impending job interview). At other times, talking to others, doing some research or even seeking professional help may lead us to the best course of action. Whether our process of problem-solving is simple or elaborate will of course depend on the complexity of our situation.

While it may be possible to solve certain problems, be sure that the things you turn your attention to are worthy of your effort. Many problems resolve themselves over time and others are not that important. Sometimes our best strategy is allow time to pass, as very often so does the problem. If you were to recall the many things that you have worried about over the years, you would probably find that the vast majority did not come to anything, or resolved themselves without your intervention.

### *Practise acceptance for things beyond your control*

While we may instinctively want to eliminate every possible danger, many of the issues we worry about are beyond our control (for example, the state of the economy) or we have already done as much as we can do (for example, the possibility of fillings when we go to the dentist). When there is nothing more we can do, clearly, our best option is to practice acceptance. Recognising that worrying really does not 'add value' or provide protection can help us to do that.

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#### **EXERCISE 5: Reflect on the idea of acceptance**

Read through the items in your Worries Log and identify any CPs (current problems) that are beyond your control. How comfortable do you feel with letting go of these concerns? Do you feel compelled to worry about them, even though you know there is nothing you can do? If this is the case, it may be helpful to explore the beliefs that perpetuate your urge to worry.

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### **Beliefs that perpetuate the urge to worry**

Our brain is designed to pay attention to threats. In the highly dangerous world of our stone-aged ancestors where predators roamed and cavemen hunted with spears, being vigilant to danger optimised one's chances of survival. Although our world is infinitely safer in the 21st century, some of us continue to perceive the world as dangerous — not so much physically dangerous these days, but in other ways. Paying attention to present and future threats still feels protective. Habitual worriers find it hard to resist the urge to worry because not worrying makes them feel vulnerable and exposed.

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#### **EXERCISE 6: Visualisation**

Close your eyes and visualise yourself going about your normal activities completely free of worry. Observe what you are doing, how you feel, how your life is different. Do you notice any resistance to the idea of releasing all worry? If so, what do you fear could happen?

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Although the idea of being totally free of worry may seem attractive, many people who do this exercise discover they feel ambivalent about giving it up. For instance, they may notice that worry gives them a sense of control, and the idea of relinquishing the habit makes them feel unsafe.

*Worry is very often confused with problem-solving.* It may make us feel like we are doing something about a potential problem, even though we are not doing anything useful. Problem-solving is concrete and solution focused, and usually leads to some action that addresses a problem. Worry is often speculative, meandering and repetitive, and rarely leads to practical solutions. It is important to recognise that problem-solving and worry are two different processes. *If problem-solving is appropriate, we can do this without worrying.* Worry does not add value.

Some people feel compelled to worry because they believe that it prepares them for the worst. As one woman put it: 'If I expect some disaster and it doesn't happen, then I will feel relieved. If it does happen, then at least I will have prepared myself, so I won't be too distressed.' While this type of thinking might appear to be logical, it is actually irrational. Because the majority of things we worry about never eventuate, we create a lot of unnecessary suffering, and deprive ourselves of the opportunity to feel good in the here and now. In effect, our worrying creates much more real and immediate suffering than the situations we fear. In addition, on the rare occasions where our feared situations do eventuate, having worried about it for weeks, months or years beforehand does not provide an advantage. On the contrary, it usually maintains high levels of anxiety throughout that period, and can make psychological adjustment more difficult. The reality is that if it happens, we will address it then, and we will learn to cope. Having worried about it beforehand provides no protection.

As long as part of us believes that worry is protective and to not worry is dangerous, we will always be resistant to letting it go.

In order to give up the habit we need to identify the assumptions that drive our own urge to worry, and replace them with more reasonable ideas. For example:

- *Worry does not protect me, or give me control.*
- *Worry does not prevent bad things from happening. It makes no difference to outcomes.*
- *I can problem-solve if necessary, without worrying.*
- *I can motivate myself to get things done by setting goals rather than by worrying.*
- *If things go wrong I will cope then. There is no advantage to worrying now 'just in case'.*

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#### Exercise 7: The Worry Delay Pad

Using a small pad once again, jot down your worry thoughts each time they pop into your mind (just a few words). The next part is crucial: **now make a decision to postpone worry about that issue until 7.00 pm** (or some other designated time) that evening. Tell yourself: 'I'll focus on this tonight' and then switch your attention to whatever you are doing at the time. Whenever the thought re-emerges, simply remind yourself that it is in the pad and you will come back to it this evening. Whenever new worry thoughts enter your mind, write them in your pad. You are not trying to prevent worry thoughts from entering your mind. Rather you are choosing **not to engage with the thought right now** – you will come back to it later.

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There are many interesting lessons that come from doing this exercise. Firstly, many people are surprised to find that it is not so difficult to let go of their worry thoughts when they know that they will come back to them later that the day. People who had previously said 'I have no control over my worrying' discover that they can choose to not engage with their worry thoughts, right now. (This is a similar process to what occurs when people write down thoughts that are keeping them awake in the middle of the night. By recording their thoughts they feel reassured that they can follow up on the issue the next day.)

A second important lesson that comes from using worry delay for several weeks is the discovery that nothing bad happens when we don't worry. The exercise enables us to experience what it feels like to *not* be constantly engaged in worry. It provides experiential learning — we discover that not engaging with worry thoughts makes no difference to outcomes. For many habitual worriers this is a powerful lesson.

Many people who do this exercise report that they do not bother to review their worry thoughts in the evening, because they no longer seem important. While this is reasonable, there are some benefits in going to the trouble of reviewing your Worry Delay Pad. Once again, you will discover that the majority of the things you worried about were inconsequential or speculative (similar findings to keeping a Worries Log, as in the earlier exercise). The process also reinforces the notion that just because something feels real and important at the time, does not mean that it actually is. What a difference a few hours can make!

### **Mindful attention to thoughts**

Most of the time when we worry, we are not aware that there is a process going on inside our mind. Rarely do we stop and reflect: 'Isn't that interesting? Look at how my mind keeps scanning for threats, jumping from one worry thought to another.' We get so caught up in our thoughts, that they just feel self-evident and true. This process has been described as a state of 'fusion' with our thoughts because we are so absorbed in them that they are our 'reality'.

The ability to *observe the process* of thoughts popping into our mind without becoming absorbed in their contents is the opposite of this state (referred to as 'defusion'). By stepping back and watching the process, we disconnect from absorption in our worry thoughts. For instance, we may notice how our mind keeps returning to particular themes, flits off to other topics, comes back to earlier worries, and then flits again to new ones. Noticing the

process and labelling it for what it is — ‘I am caught up in worry thoughts right now’ — helps us to detach from their content and enables us to experience the thoughts in a different way. We come to realise that worries are just objects produced by our mind. They are not truth or reality or something we need to take too seriously. Although we may already know this logically, the experience of observing our thoughts in action can help us to see this more deeply.

The process of observing one's thoughts is a component of *mindfulness*, a practice that has been part of the Buddhist tradition for thousands of years. As research in western countries began to identify the benefits of mindfulness over the last two decades, the practice has been increasingly used in psychological therapies, as well as by individuals seeking to improve aspects of their lives. Put simply, mindfulness involves learning to be fully in the present moment, without judging any aspect of current experience.

Mindfulness can be practised as a *meditation* (usually, sitting with eyes closed, focusing on one's breath or other aspects of one's current experience) or as a *state of awareness* in any daily life situation. It involves being present with what is happening in this very moment. We can learn to be mindfully aware of the thoughts that enter our mind, as well as the presence of any ongoing issues of concern in the ‘back of our mind’. (This may include perceived threats that demand part of our attention, even when we are thinking about other issues.) We can learn to be mindfully aware of our current thoughts, mood and emotions, body sensations and the interactions between them. We can also become mindful of other sensory input, such as smells, tastes and sounds. Mindful awareness can be developed by paying more attention to what is happening in the present moment, in both the meditative state and during daily life situations.

Mindful awareness of our thoughts during daily life situations can help us to be more aware of worry thoughts as they pop into our mind, and so, separate ourselves (‘defuse’) from those

thoughts. By recognising that ‘these thoughts are just thoughts’ rather than reality, we gain some perspective on how our mind works. We can learn to step back and just observe our thoughts without ‘buying into’ them. Regular mindfulness practice can help us to build understanding on a deeper level that thoughts are just thoughts and they are not reality. (To learn more about the practice of mindfulness see Chapter 3 in this book and the ‘Further reading’ section below.)

## Conclusion

The strategies outlined in this chapter comprise techniques that are often recommended by psychologists to help individuals to break the worry habit. Taking the time to complete the exercises and reflect on your experiences in writing (not just in your mind) will lead to more powerful change than simply reading about them. Learning through doing (experiential learning) provides the most powerful way to create change.

To summarise, below is a list of the main strategies that have been described in this chapter. In addition to reviewing these strategies, the recommended references listed below can further extend your knowledge and understanding of this subject.

## Key strategies described in this chapter

- Do not confuse worry and problem-solving — you can do one without the other.
- Identify the avoidance and safety behaviours that you use in order to try to protect yourself. Start to relinquish these behaviours, with the goal of abandoning them in the longer term. Doing so will help you to discover that there are few negative, and lots of positive, consequences.
- Start a regimen of worry awareness training. This will involve logging your worry thoughts, and reviewing them each evening for at least two weeks. During your evening review, separate

thoughts that focus on realistic problems from those that are speculative ('What if?'). Looking at your current problems, distinguish what is within your control from what is beyond it. Problem-solve if appropriate, and choose to let go of issues that are beyond your control or not worthy of intervention.

- Identify your own assumptions about the benefits of worrying (such as 'Worrying gives me control', 'Worrying prepares me for the worst' or 'Worrying motivates me to get things done'), and start to challenge these assumptions.
- Practise worry delay using a Worry Pad. This will help you to discover that you can choose not to engage with worry thoughts. You will also discover that it is safe to relinquish worry, and that whether or not you worry makes no difference to outcomes.
- Learn to practise mindfulness — both meditation and mindful awareness — during daily life. These techniques will help you to 'get' on a deeper level that thoughts are just thoughts, not reality. This process will ultimately help to disengage from worry habits.

### Useful websites

- Centre for Clinical Interventions: <http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au> — Select: 'Workbooks': 'Me? Worry? Mastering your worries'
- This way up: <https://thiswayup.org.au>
- Anxiety Online: <http://www.anxietyonline.org.au>
- E-couch: <http://www.ecouch.anu.edu.au>

### Further reading

J Brantley, *Calming your anxious mind: How mindfulness and compassion can free you from anxiety, fear and panic*, New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA, 2007.

- RL Leahy, *The worry cure: Seven steps to stop worry from stopping you*, Harmony, New York, 2005.
- JP Forsyth and GH Eifert, *The mindfulness and acceptance workbook for anxiety: A guide to breaking free from anxiety, phobias, and worry using acceptance and commitment therapy*, New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA, 2007.
- M Williams and D Penman, *Mindfulness: a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world*, Piatkus Books, London, 2011.