

7. The Way Out of Worry by Joseph McCaffrey.

By Joseph F. McCaffrey

During the last year or so our country has been on an emotional roller coaster. There have been both highs and lows, but the collective national mood increasingly seems to be one of depression and worry.

Although there are real issues that need addressing, much of the current mood stems more from perception than reality.

For example, news reports focus on layoffs and the families they affect, putting the problem front and center in our attention. However, the unemployment rate, whether its 7%, 10%, or 15%, means that 93%, 90% or 85% of us still have jobs. But because of where our focus is, the mental and emotional depression affects everyone.

In a way, the financial crisis itself makes the case for the importance of perceptions. The economy is slow so people are afraid to spend and banks are afraid to lend, which makes the economy slow, which...

I'll leave the economic jump-start to our new president. Here I want to give you a bit of advice about dealing with worry.

To begin, you may want to look at your assumptions about worry. Why are you doing it? Do you think it somehow serves you?

Some people think that worrying is a sign of maturity and being responsible, or that worrying is a way to figure out an answer to a problem
None of that is true.

Excessive worry is more a sign of inability to gain a proper perspective. Rather than producing a solution, it keeps you stuck in the problem. This is a good place to apply the Pareto principle. Spend 20% of your time or less identifying the problem and 80% working on the solution.

Another reason some people worry is that they feel it somehow protects them from bad things happening.

That feeling borders on superstition. All worry does is keep you from enjoying the present moment because your mind is filled with thoughts of terrible things that may or may not happen in the future.

As you consider your beliefs about worry and why you may engage in it, you may find you want to stop worrying so much. Here are a couple of additional tips to help you accomplish that.

An important first step for many people is to develop a tolerance for uncertainty.

Many people who worry chronically do so because they have difficulty accepting uncertainty. But uncertainty is inescapable. Unfortunately for them, the old saying that nothing is certain except death and taxes carries more than a little true. Worrying does nothing to change life's uncertainties.

One answer to this is to apply one of the principles of cognitive restructuring: questioning your thoughts.

Many people go through life never questioning the accuracy or usefulness of their beliefs or automatic thoughts. Often, just taking a step back and asking yourself about the accuracy of a given thought gives you a better perspective. Sometimes you'll realize that a thought has little validity and you'll be able to move beyond it.

Is it possible, or even desirable, to be certain about everything in life? Is it possible to accept the inevitable uncertainty and still enjoy life?

If something is uncertain, do you tend to envision a bad or a good outcome? As Mark Twain said, "I've experienced many terrible things in my life, most of which have fortunately never happened."

For many people, worrying has become a way of life - worrisome thoughts intrude throughout the day, distracting them from their present moment (which usually isn't too bad). This can be a difficult habit (and it is a habit) to change. But it is possible.

When most people question their assumptions and beliefs about worry as I describe above, they realize that it isn't serving them, yet they still feel compelled to worry.

First, what generally doesn't work is trying to stop "cold turkey". Feeling stuck in worry and stopping just by telling yourself to do so isn't likely to work. But here's an approach that does work for most people.

The better strategy is to accept your tendency to worry, but agree with yourself to confine it to a set period of time once or twice a day. Set some time aside, say fifteen or twenty minutes, where you allow yourself to worry to your heart's content.

Then when you catch yourself with worrisome thoughts at other times of day, remind yourself that you're going to do your worrying later.

Most people find that this allows them stop worrying in the immediate moment because they know they can do it a little later. This frees mental and emotional energy to focus on what's working and solutions for what isn't.

The next step is to gradually reduce the daily time allotted to worrying.

Freeing yourself from worry spares you emotional turmoil and allows you to focus your energy in more productive ways. You might also want to use some of the time you free up to develop the knack of living in gratitude, but that's a topic for another day.

[Ed. Note: Joseph F. McCaffrey, MD, FACS is a board-certified surgeon with extensive experience in alternative medicine, including certification as a HeartMath Trainer. His areas of expertise include mind-body interaction and cognitive restructuring. Dr. McCaffrey strives to help people attain their optimum level of vitality through attention to all aspects of wellness.