



## **The Role of Worry in Panic and Anxiety**

by Vijai Sharma, PhD

*Taken from the book Overcoming Anxiety and Depression and Breathing Correctly in COPD/Emphysema: A Self Care Book for People with COPD and a Psychosocial Manual for Professionals*

*by Vijai Sharma, intended for future publication*

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**The origin of the word “worry” offers interesting insights regarding the nature and function of worry.** According to the Webster Unabridged Dictionary, the word “worry” is derived from the Medieval English word, “Worrowen,” “wirien,” and Anglo-Saxon root “Wyrgran.” These root words meant “to choke’ or “to strangle.”

In my own research I traced the possible root of the word “anxiety” in a Sanskrit root word “ahanti” which also means to choke or to strangle. Isn’t that interesting? The root meanings of both words “worry” and “anxiety” originally meant to choke or to strangle, thus referring to their impact on breathing.

Such symptoms as “choking” “smothering” “suffocating,” closing of the throat or “lump in the throat” are commonly experienced by people who chronically worry and/or suffer from chronic anxiety or panic attacks. Anxiety and the act of worrying

affected the respiratory system in the ancient times exactly as it does now!

In the Medieval English the verb "worry" also meant "to gnaw," or to continually bite or tear something with the teeth seen in such expression as, "The dog was worrying an old shoe." Here is the irony: Worry does the same thing to us that the dog in that expression does to an old shoe! Worries and chronic anxiety gnaw at us, bite us and wear away our peace of mind bit by bit. Such is the work of worrying on the worrier's sense of inner security and peace of mind.

Worrying, like rumination, is to chew over and over again that which has already been chewed. Worrying has a repetitive and obsessive quality about it. A worrier is obsessed with the negative outcomes and pitfalls and "ruminates" over them.

Dr. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist and author of "Driven to Distraction" fame describes worrying as a "disease of the imagination." A worrier imagines every misfortune that might befall the victim. Oh, those errors, accidents, and all possible bad things that can go wrong! Remember, some of our "demons" are created by us in the first place.

In order to work with a problem you have to first accept you have a problem. Likewise, in order to change something, you first have to accept you need to change some thing. ***Do you recognize you have a worry problem?***

- Have you begun to worry more than you ever did?
- Do you worry more than others do?
- Do you tend to multiply the possibilities of what can go wrong?
- On an average day, over the past month what percentage of the day did you feel worried?
- Have you frequently been so worried that you kept on tossing and turning in the bed and couldn't sleep?
- Have you ever been told, "Stop worrying! Relax?"

Did it help? No? Don't worry, we will provide tips to help you cut down on your worry time. Read on!

I am sure that after worrying all night long you find yourself in the morning exactly in the same situation you were in the night before, except more sleepy and tired! My point is this: In spite of worrying all night, you didn't solve anything, learn anything new, or acquire any possession, except perhaps a headache. God gave us the ability to worry to help us assess the risks facing us, and to plan appropriate steps to meet our needs. The purpose of the "work of worrying" is summarized in the saying, "forewarned is forearmed!" If you only worry and not take the next step and don't take the required action, you don't ever get out of the swirling waters onto the shore.

## Tips for cutting down on the habit of worrying: The "One-Minute Manager"

If you are a chronic worrier, it means that through the practice of many years of worrying, you have gotten really good at the work of worrying. Know that the mind learns to have "worry spasms," or a kind of "brain hiccups" that just refuse to quit. When the first worry thought strikes you, you have just a few seconds, a maximum of one minute, to break the chain of worry thoughts before your entire mind gets involved in it.

Once you get too involved with your worrying thoughts, you end up in the "worry grip!" Then you might not be able to relax for the next several hours or the whole night. Therefore, the first few seconds as you start worrying are critical to stop the ever-growing worry web. Break the sequence of worry thoughts as one worry thought start connecting with the next worry thought!

Because when your mind gets involved with the action of worrying, the body too gets involved. The body tenses up and the level of stress hormones keep rising, which keeps fueling worrying thoughts non stop. Train yourself to stop worrying Just as you train your muscles to learn a golf swing, you can train your brain to take a swing at the worry monster.

### Here are some tips to take a swing at the worry thoughts:

1. As soon as you catch the first worry thought, challenge it! Say something positive to yourself right away. Offer counter evidence to oppose the main thrust of your worry thoughts. Offer thoughts to yourself that negate your worst fears.

2. Imagine all possible outcomes instead of the negative outcomes. Give counter evidence of what your worry thought suggests might happen. Challenge "What if...?" thoughts with "So what..." thoughts. Also challenge your negative thoughts with skeptical attitude and ask "How so?"

3. Here is an example of countering the "What if" thoughts:

**Worry thought:** What if no body comes to see me anymore?

**Counter thought:** So what if they don't come to see me anymore. I can do without them.

**Worry thought:** They may all be tired of me.

**Counter thought:** How so? I feel they genuinely care about me.  
Reverse the tables on your worry thoughts!

4. However, you have just one minute to get on top of the worry monster. You have to literally become a One-minute manager. When a worry tries to seize your mind you have about one minute to bounce that worry off you. The sooner the better! If you let those first few seconds slip, that one worry will spread its

tentacles and multiply into dozens of related worries.

Worry is like your garden weed in the spring. Before you know it weeds take over the whole yard. Catch it young. Apply weed killer as soon as you see weed sprouting. You can break a single stick with ease; it's difficult to break a bunch of them together.

5. If you've tried everything else and you still can't shake off your worry thoughts, it's better to get out of the bed, sit at the desk or on your sofa and write them down. When you write them down, read them to yourself. You may often find that your imagination is somewhat exaggerated.

6. When a worry strikes you, do something physical for five minutes such as, stretch, hum or whistle. Then sit at the desk and write down the problem that you were worried about. Write down the actions you can to address that problem. Note the earliest time when you can act on them.

7. Think of a positive self-affirming thought, for example, "I am a doer, not a worrier!"

8. Blow your breath into both your palms and say to yourself, "I just blew off my worry," and go to bed. Then, the next morning, follow the actions you wrote down. One reason some chronic worriers have trouble sleeping is the vast number of people and situations they must fear. If one doesn't quickly strike at worries, they multiply adding to an ever-growing list of situations to worry about. Soon, the world seems to be a dangerous place. Previously one sensed danger from just a few sources, now he or she sees it everywhere. The fact is that there is no short cut and no easy way out. The dragons have to be slain one by one.

We worry about everything, ranging from things less likely to happen to those that are most unlikely to happen. All things are not lions and tigers. They may *appear* so to us. We underestimate our own power and overestimate the danger of things that confront us. You can learn to extricate your life from the clutches of anxiety.

If needed, seek the help of a therapist who can teach you how to tackle the Problem, rather than avoid it.

Give yourself a gift: Learn ways to calm your fears. As you involve yourself in new situations and new activities, preoccupation with anxiety will decrease. As you develop greater self-confidence and find your life more satisfying, you may not even need anxiety pills and wouldn't have to worry about whether a pill is habit forming or would it negatively interact with other medications you take.

The knowledge that we have the power to choose our thoughts is one of the best kept secrets! Most people believe they don't have a choice regarding what they think and how they feel. They think that negative and disturbing thoughts come

from nowhere and invade their mind.

Others believe they have always thought and felt this way, so they are unable to think anything different. Not true! If there is anything we have power over, it is our own thoughts. You may not have power over the outside world, but you have the choice to decide what thoughts you want to think all day long!

Empowering thoughts can infuse you with strength you never thought you had! Negative thoughts can deplete you of the power you always thought you had. Your power within can go up and down depending on the kind of thoughts you choose to dwell upon. So, what would you like to think?

In some cases, worrying is just a symptom of an anxiety disorder, depressive disorder, or a result of a deeply painful life event, such as betrayal of trust, abandonment, severe humiliation or abuse.

Or, you may have had a "Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)" from very early on, long before you developed COPD. You may have been born with what is called "anxious temperament." (e.g. J. Kagan's work on variable heart rate in infants). According to temperament related research, perhaps 20% of children are born with anxious temperament. Out of the 20% anxious temperament children, some will develop one or more anxiety spectrum disorders, notably, GAD, phobias, panic attacks or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.

A person with COPD may have had an anxiety disorder prior to developing COPD or develop one after the onset of the lung impairment. If you have excessive anxiety or concern associated with breathing difficulty, get an evaluation for a possible underlying disorder.

If there is a traumatic event in your past that keeps gnawing at you, work through it with a counselor. Often the way to overcome pain is through it and not around it.

Chronic and excessive worrying can get you trapped inside and isolate you from others, thus stripping you of your social support system. Don't get so involved in the act of worrying that you might not find time to connect with others. For sure, don't let worrying isolate you from people who love you!

## **Worry Buster Exercises**

### **Write down your three major worries**

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**Write down your “Worry thoughts” related to each of the three major worries**

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**Write Down Your “Counter Thoughts” for three major “Worry thoughts”**

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