

# Breaking the Worry Habit

*Archibald D. Hart, Ph.D., FPPR.*

## **“Don’t Worry”**

It’s so easy to say it. I’ve seen it emblazoned on T-shirts and bumper stickers. But it *isn’t* easy not to worry. It’s like trying to tell someone who is overweight, “Just don’t eat so much.” It’s true, but it’s not really helpful!

To overcome worry you need to understand why you worry, come to see how useless it is to just worry, and then learn how to turn your worry into action.

## **Why Do We Worry?**

The answer is simple: We are human, and we were designed to worry. I worry at times. I wish I didn’t, but it’s not easy to avoid it when someone you love is sick or you have some threat hanging over you.

“But isn’t it healthy to worry sometimes?” That’s one of those trick questions. It all depends on how you define *healthy*. Let’s rephrase the question to make it answerable.

“Is it impossible to go through life without worrying occasionally?” Yes it is. The only people who never worry are sociopaths—those who never feel anxiety over anything. Yes, we all worry sometimes, because worry is a form of anxiety that helps alert us to danger areas in our lives. It only becomes unhealthy when it either persists too long or when it fails to lead us to constructive solutions.

## **The Uselessness of Persistent Worry**

Persistent worry, the sort that becomes a sort of lifestyle, is not only unproductive, but it gets in the way of living a vibrant, fulfilling life. People who worry too much are incapacitated by it. They literally go round in circles and cannot find the exit. Furthermore, there is a lot of research that shows that persistent worry is actually bad for your health. The plain, simple words of Jesus clearly tell us not to worry about our lives, because worry cannot “add a single hour” to them (Matt. 6:25-27).

## **Turning Worry into Action**

Excessive worrying is a habit of your mind, and you need to break this habit without denying that something may be wrong. The most constructive way to do this is to sort out what part of your worry is useless and what part should be converted into an emotion called *concern*. Excessive worry that never moves you to take action is unhealthy. On the other hand, being concerned about a problem is healthy because you understand what you can and cannot do to deal with it.

How is concern different from worry? Simply put, worry is that kind of unproductive mental activity that keeps thoughts revolving endlessly in our minds, creating stress in our bodies. Concern, on the other hand, is a kind of mental activity that focuses on a problem with a view to taking some action that resolves it. I can worry about a lump in my body and do nothing about it, or I can turn that worry into concern and go see my doctor!

#### **Four Steps to Convert Worry into Concern**

God gives us the power to cope with every challenge that might confront us. It is a mistake to think that we should never worry. Rather, we should take our worries to God and ask him to show us what action we should take. There are times when worry seems to overpower and even immobilize us, but take heart and try the following four steps:

1. Monitor your thinking so as to catch yourself worrying. As soon as you catch yourself worrying, postpone your worrying to a given “worry period” later when you have time for it. Write down the worry so you won’t forget it. This helps your mind “let go” of it until the appointed time.
2. Make a date to worry. Set aside a time for a “worry period”- no more than five minutes (use a timer if necessary). For example, you can do it right after lunch, before you go back to work, or before the kids get home from school.
3. Concentrate on worrying. When your appointed “worry time” arrives, pull out your notebook, start a timer, and begin to devote the next five minutes to worrying. Do it in an attitude of prayer. Force yourself to think about what’s worrying you but with a view to finding a solution. Ask yourself, *What can I do to deal with this worry?* In this way, you will be able to change some of your worry to concern.
4. When your worry time is up put away your worries and focus *only* on whatever concern is left. Decide on what action you can take and write it in your notebook to remind you. Then go about your business, ignoring any worries that might linger in your mind.

This technique, while not perfect, has helped many people cope with their worry. It helps you to confront your worries directly and not try to avoid them. It prevents what is called the “incubation” of worrying, a pattern that reinforces worry.

Try forming such a partnership with God yourself. I think you will be pleasantly surprised at how well it works to keep your mind at peace! If you would like more tailored ideas regarding worry, anxiety and other issues please contact a Crossroads Counselor at (803) 808-1800.

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