

20 Chapter

Superstitious? What's the Evidence?

Are you afraid that if you stop worrying, bad things will happen?

Do you worry about bad things happening because, if they do happen, you believe it will be less painful?

If either of these beliefs fuel your worries, they are probably attempts to control things you cannot control. However, instead of giving you control over worried-about outcomes, they actually make your life more out of control. If neither of these apply to you, skip this chapter.

Only the first worry is truly superstitious. Sometimes we have a healthy concern that can help to protect people. Being concerned and engaging in planning and problem-solving isn't superstitious. Some may argue that prayer is superstitious, but those who pray believe a higher power can help them.

If you suffer from superstitious worries, you believe that worrying about a situation can have a protective effect. For instance, if your daughter is driving back to college, it doesn't hurt to check the car to see that it is operating properly and check that the tires are in good condition. It may not hurt to suggest that she pull over to the side of the road if she is tired or suggest she find someone to ride with her. A prayer for safe travels prior to her departure is reasonable. But if you believe that worrying will increase the likelihood that she will make it to her destination safely and you worry until she calls to let you know she made it, you suffer from superstitious worry. The next worksheet can help you to rethink this habit.

If you think that worrying about something bad happening will cushion the blow if and when it happens, you *may* be right. However, there are several reasons I recommend that you stop this. The way we treat this problematic habit overlaps with superstitious worry.

Hopefully, answering the questions above led you to begin to question your superstitious beliefs so as to help you to reduce your worry. The world is beautiful and there are many wonderful things about it. Unfortunately, though, bad things happen that can negatively affect our lives forever and even end our lives and the lives of loved ones. It makes sense that you would want to do everything you can to avoid getting laid off, losing a loved one to a tragedy, or making a costly mistake. Unfortunately, other than taking reasonable problem-solving measures, there is nothing you can do to prevent most of the things that you are trying to control with your superstitious worries. The irony is that, in an attempt to control fate or serendipity, you actually become more out of control with worry and anxiety. Depression or dysthymia (chronic low-level depression) can even set in from feeling that something awful could strike at any moment. To paraphrase a quote from rapper, Wiz Khalifa: "Worrying is stupid. It's like walking around with an umbrella, waiting for it to rain." And I will add that when you do this, you often block out the sun. Or, in most cases, worry is interest paid on a debt that never comes due.

Superstition

How do you think this process works? Explain to the best of your ability how you think the thoughts in your head affect your loved ones who are miles away.

What evidence do you have that your thoughts *do* protect your loved ones?

If there is anything else that you are worried about superstitiously, such as losing your job or worrying about your performance on a test or interview, how do you believe the thoughts in your head keep it from happening?

Is it possible that, had you not worried, or had you worried significantly less, the events in your life would have turned out very similar, except that you would be more relaxed and happier?

- Yes No

Do you think that worrying gives you a false sense of control? That is, on some level, do you feel like you are doing something about your worry that gives you a sense of control over it that you like?

- Yes No

In what ways do these worries cause your life to be more out of control? For example, does your worry and anxiety cause you to be irritable, to lose sleep, to lose concentration, to feel physical discomfort, or otherwise interfere with your life?

Close your eyes and imagine what your life will be like if you reject your superstitious beliefs and stop the worry associated with them. How will it be different?

Let's think about when we attempt to use worry to reduce shock and pain. First of all, if you worry about tragedy because you think it will help you to prevent some of the pain when tragedy strikes, you are gambling. Moreover, you are betting that something awful will happen to you. Day after day, year after year, you suffer from worry. Each day you are betting on an unlikely scenario and the payoff in that unlikely event would bring you no gain, only the possibility of a somewhat lower loss. Even if you do suffer a tragedy and you feel a little less shocked and a little less pain, will it be worth it? And, because we can never predict the kind of tragedy that will occur, if it does, will your efforts really help to prepare you? If tragedy strikes, you will still experience a great deal of pain and still be unprepared to deal with it.

If you still feel a desire to worry and believe a bit of a cushion is worth the gamble, how much do you need to worry to reduce shock and pain? Chances are you're not sure how much is enough. I recommend that you begin by worrying on a daily basis for about 15 minutes. This could be on a walk or commute, during your child's nap time or tea time, or during any other time you carve out of each day. Some clients feel better if they write about their worry in a journal and then mindfully close the journal to signify going on with life until the next worry session. If you still worry in between sessions, use the postponement technique in Chapter 6. If this is enough for you to feel as though you have done due diligence, give yourself the weekend off. Experiment by gradually reducing the time: three times per week, then twice, then once, and so on. You may even be able to get down to once per month or stop. If at any point the worry becomes problematic again, increase the frequency or duration of your planned worrying sessions.