

# 5

Chapter

# Don't Worry, Problem-Solve

At least one of the reasons you worry is that you want to have control of your life. You are trying to increase the likelihood that things will turn out well and decrease the likelihood that things will turn out poorly. You might erroneously believe that if you don't worry, things will turn out poorly. If you believe that worry has some type of protective effect on you and your loved ones, certainly check out Chapter 20, on superstitious worry. If instead, you believe that worrying will help you to make better decisions, think again. The reality is that research indicates that worry actually interferes with problem-solving. Anxiety and worried habits have a way of putting blinders on, such that solutions are less likely to come to mind. Almost certainly, you have experienced times when you stopped worrying about something, began to relax, and then voilà, a solution popped into your mind.

Some worries aren't amenable to problem-solving, but many are. One very simple approach to managing worry is to think about what you can do about it and whether you believe any of those things are worth putting into action. If there is nothing you can or want to do about your worry, it is completely useless. Basically, there are three things you can do with a worry: do something, do nothing, or plan to do something later (or plan to do something if and when it is needed).

## EXERCISE

### Allowing Helpful Ideas to Arise

1. Get yourself relaxed with meditation, breathing, muscle relaxation, or doing something you enjoy that relaxes you, such as reading, gardening, or getting in a hot tub or hot bath.
2. Think about your worry, keeping your mind open to possible solutions. If negative thoughts are interfering, then go to step 3.
3. (Optional) After each thought, label it as "helpful" or "not helpful." Most of the time, when you are thinking thoughts that aren't helpful and you label them as such, those thoughts will decrease and even go away. This clears the mind to make way for more helpful thoughts.

Another way to problem-solve is to brainstorm all possible solutions. The more people we involve in brainstorming solutions, the more likely we are to reach the best solution. Creativity experts have taught us two things about problem-solving: (1) We will come up with a better and more complete list if we work independently first and bring our list together with the lists of others later than if we work together at the start. (2) When we include unethical, illegal, and impractical solutions, it gets the creative juices flowing. This helps us to arrive at better ideas that *are* practical, legal, and ethical than if we begin by restricting our list to only solutions we are prepared to use. When you have a worry or concern that is amenable to problem-solving, use the following worksheet for yourself and as many people as you'd like to involve.

## Solving a Specific Problem

What is a worry that you have that you believe is amenable to problem-solving?

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What have you tried so far to solve your problems?

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Brainstorm below all possible things you could do, even if they are illegal, unethical, or impractical. Remember that including these ideas can help to fuel greater creativity and lead to more useful ideas.

Optional: Give this worksheet to one or more friends or family members to complete independently of you.

Ideas:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_\_\_
13. \_\_\_\_\_
14. \_\_\_\_\_
15. \_\_\_\_\_

Now cross off all the ideas on all the lists that you do not want to do, including those that are unethical or illegal. From those remaining, circle the ones you like the most.

Can you combine or tweak them? Or perhaps you would like to create a stepwise solution starting with the easiest. For example, maybe you'll start with number 3 and if that doesn't work you'll try number 6.

The previous worksheet is best for a specific problem that you are worried about. The worksheet on the next page is better for recurrent or everyday worries—that is, things like work, children, or what others think of you. These are things you may worry about on a regular or semiregular basis.

The next worksheet, *How to Prevent Worry From Interfering* is particularly useful when you are about to engage in an activity and you are concerned that worry will interfere with that activity. Some examples of times that worry can interfere with your life include when you are lying down to sleep, studying, enjoying an evening with friends, reading for pleasure, watching a movie or TV show, and completing any task that involves concentration.

Regardless of the activity, there are three choices that you can make before engaging in it: do something about the worry before the activity, plan to do something after it, or do nothing.

I encourage you to do the worksheet when you're concerned worry may interfere with something you are about to do. Once you get good at it, you can try to skip the worksheet and go straight to integrating the things you are planning to do into your to-do list or calendar.

**Note:** If you complete this next worksheet for insomnia, it is best that you do it at least one hour before bed but not so early in the day that new worries are likely to arise.

**SAMPLE  
WORKSHEET**

## How to Prevent Worry from Interfering

Here is an example of a completed worksheet for someone who is concerned that their worry will interfere with their sleep:

What I'm likely to worry about in bed	What I want to do about it before bed
My to-do list	Make tomorrow's to-do list and put in planned order
In-laws' visit next month	Call Annie (cleaning person) for 8th, 9th, or 10th Tomorrow: ask to take day off work on Friday 10th to grocery shop, etc.
Afraid I'll be laid off	Nothing

## How to Prevent Worry from Interfering

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Do this any time you think worry will interfere with something (e.g., sleep, studying, enjoying friends). In the first column, write what you think you may worry about during that time. In the second column, write what you want to do about it before that event. You have three choices:

1. **Do Something:** do something specific about it before the event.
2. **Plan Something:** plan to do something after the event or another day (record it in your calendar).
3. **Do Nothing:** decide that you've given it "due diligence" and you don't want to do anything at all about it. If you complete this worksheet for insomnia, it is best that you do it at least one hour before bed, but not so early in the day that new worries are likely to arise.

<b>What I'm likely to worry about</b> <hr style="width: 80%; margin: 5px auto;"/>	<b>What I want to do about it before</b> <hr style="width: 80%; margin: 5px auto;"/>