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Chapter

The “P” Sheet: Preferred Ways to Think Instead of Worrying

After several years of specializing in treating worry, I realized that many of the strategies I teach start with the letter “P”:

- **Prevent** anxiety from getting out of control by catching it early.
- **Postpone** worries to another time.
- **Problem-solve** your concerns instead of worrying about them.
- **Process words** are gentler and thereby more effective than commands when moving toward relaxation.
- Focus on the **Present** because worry is about the future. Focusing on our senses puts us in the moment.

Two additional strategies covered in this workbook have been changed to “P” words. These are:

- **Permitting** thoughts and feelings. This is another way to say “mindful acceptance.”
- **Positive thoughts** include both B³s and being mindful of what you are grateful for.

Finally, it occurred to me that two other types of thinking that start with the letter “P” are ways of thinking that are preferred to worry. While much more than a way of thinking to many, praying is better than worrying. Prayer translates worries into a request for help so that we are essentially doing something about it, as well as adding the additional benefit of faith. In fact, when things that we worry about are out of control, many people are comforted by saying or thinking, “I’m giving it over to God,” so as to reach acceptance of the outcome and let go of worry. This is similar to acceptance; you are trusting that God will take over. A popular serenity prayer includes both acceptance and problem-solving:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

Courage to change the things I can,

And wisdom to know the difference.

Regardless of your religious beliefs, these are healthy words to live by. In addition, if you feel overwhelmed by changing the things you want to change, consider accepting the things you aren’t ready to change yet. This can be very helpful too.

Another “P” word is “pleasant.” Mindfulness and “being in the now” have become increasingly popular over the past couple of decades. The emphasis in the media and in books on being in the moment may have given thoughts about the past and the future a bad name. It’s true that being in the moment frees us from depressing regrets from the past and worry about the future. However, it’s very healthy to reflect on warm and happy memories from the past and to fantasize, or look forward to, events in the future. Therefore, thinking pleasant thoughts is a preferred way of thinking.

Finally, it's necessary to do some planning in life, and this is better than worrying. While planning is similar to problem-solving, it is different because we can spend a lot of time planning when there are no actual problems to be solved. For example, scheduling a vacation, organizing a birthday party, and even making a to-do list are planning and can be done without worry. Perhaps planning can even prevent worry.

Therefore, we can add three more styles of thinking that are better than worrying:

- **Prayer**, especially giving worries over to God, the universe, or a higher power.
- **Pleasant thoughts**, which can include warm and happy memories of the past, fantasies, and looking forward to events in the future.
- **Planning** is a necessary part of thinking that need not involve anxiety.

Hopefully, you'll get into the habit of using the following form indefinitely. After all, it only takes about a minute to do. However, it is human nature that once we are feeling better about a problem we've taken measures to correct, we slack off and even stop practicing our healthy patterns. Without the discomfort, we may even forget to use our strategies.

Whether it's doing physical therapy, eating well, prioritizing sleep, or managing anxiety and depression, after stopping our healthy habits, the problems tend to sneak back up. Sometimes, nipping anxiety in the bud, using B³s, being grateful, and using some of the other strategies become habits and are automatic. However, during more stressful times, the old habits sometimes rear their ugly heads. So try to remember that if and when you start to feel depressed or anxious in the future, you can go back to using this sheet before the problems get out of control.

Monitoring Daily Preferred “Ps”

This monitoring form is designed to keep you mindful of engaging in these strategies on a regular basis. Positive thoughts are divided into two categories, gratefulness and B³s. Feel free to cross off any strategies that you do not find helpful. In the boxes, you have a choice. You can just check the box if you applied the strategy and mark an X or a dash if you didn't. Alternatively, you may record an estimate of how many times you applied it, give yourself a letter grade, or rate it on a numbered scale (e.g., 1–10).

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Prevent							
Postpone							
Problem-solve							
Process words							
Present focus							
Permitting (accepting)							
Positive thoughts I: Gratefulness							
Positive thoughts II: B ³ s							
Prayer							
Pleasant thoughts							
Planning							