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Chapter

Nip the Worry Spiral in the Bud

Anxiety and worry occur in a spiral of interactions between thoughts, images, physical sensations, and behaviors. Not all people who worry excessively experience all of them, but each person experiences the spiral similarly each time. Often, we are not aware of our anxiety until it's out of control. By the time we recognize it, the anxiety is high and most of the strategies are useless. In fact, when they don't work, it can make things worse. When we try to manage worry and it doesn't work, it can lead to frustration and a feeling of helplessness that can contribute to depression.

The goal is to catch worry early when the anxiety is low and the strategies are more powerful against it. We regularly see this in medicine, where it's well known that catching everything from the common cold to cancer early in the process makes treatment easier and more successful. It's similar when it comes to preventing worry from getting out of control; an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

There are two ways in which you can prevent your worry—and thereby anxiety, depression, and frustration—from getting out of control. First is to use the strategies you have learned to nip your anxiety in the bud—that is, to catch the worry spiral before it gets out of control and apply the strategies you learned in the previous chapters. The second goal is to use your strategies throughout the day to prevent anxiety and worry from taking hold in the first place. When we are more relaxed, we are less apt to begin to worry.

Think about what causes you stress. What is associated with the beginning of your spirals or even instances where your anxiety spikes quickly? Some of the most common are family, to-do lists, emails, bills, and business calls. You want to think in two ways. The first is “What starts the spiral?” And the second is “What do you do in response to this spiral?” For instance, you sense that your son is out past curfew, you feel a pit in your stomach, and you check the time or maybe you text your son. Ideally, your realization that he is late is conscious and you use a coping strategy. However, we don't usually notice our spirals until they have gained some momentum. You probably won't even notice the pit in your stomach, yet. Therefore, it's important to set up reminders. For instance, if you change the wallpaper on your phone, when you next go to text your son, the new wallpaper can remind you to use your strategies, stressed or not.

Another very useful reminder is sticky notes. Put them both in places that you associate with stress (to catch anxiety early) and in places where you will see them frequently (to help you maintain relaxation, making it less likely that spirals will start). Similarly, you can put a colorful rubber band, hair band, or twisty tie around something that you use frequently.

The next page has several suggestions that you can circle and also write in your own reminders.

Creating Reminders to Use Coping Strategies

CHANGE THINGS ON YOUR DEVICES (e.g., Smartphone, Tablet, Computer)

Circle the reminders you'd like to have. If you can, take time now to make these changes.

Wallpaper

Text tone

Email notification

Add a small sticker

Ring tone

Email tone

Use the MindBell (or similar) app

PUT UP STICKY NOTES

Considering places you will see frequently and places associated with stress, circle the places you'd like to have sticky note reminders. If you can, take time to place these now.

Dash of car

Light switches

Computer (especially where email notifications pop up)

Doorframes

Mirrors

Remote control

Books (especially textbooks or training manuals)

Refrigerator

Faucets

TV

Pantry

Clocks

Notebooks

Planners

ADD A HAIRBAND, COLORFUL RUBBER BAND, OR TWISTY TIE

Place one or more of these reminders around the following things. Circle the ones you'd like to use and consider adding these reminders now.

Mug

Cup

Key ring (or even change your key ring)

Wrist

Water bottle

Soda can

Smartphone

After about two weeks, you won't notice your reminders as much. Therefore, change your reminders regularly (e.g., change the color of your sticky notes, write something on your sticky notes, or change aspects of your phone). The goal is to use the coping strategies from previous chapters without stopping your flow of activity so that it is not inconvenient to practice them as many as 50 times per day or more. If you have extra time and you'd like to stop for several seconds or a few minutes to practice the strategies in more depth, of course that's fine. In addition to changing devices, sticky notes, or hairbands, feel free to use your own reminders, including when you begin to feel anxious. You can also ask others who witness your nervous habits to gently remind you to engage in a strategy.

Change the "Applying Strategies?" column of your daily monitoring (see the worksheet "Daily Self-Monitoring 2" in Chapter 11). Instead of using the rating scale, estimate the number of times you applied your strategies. If your anxiety is low and your use of strategies is low, that's alright. If your anxiety is moderate or high and your application of strategies is infrequent (less than 20 times), use the monitoring as a motivator to create new reminders or change your current reminders, as well as to apply the strategies rather than ignoring the reminders. Remember you can apply these strategies without taking any extra time. If you stop each time you see a reminder, you will get frustrated.

Use situations in which you are waiting as an opportunity to practice your strategies. Whether you're waiting in line, for an appointment, or for a friend, rather than using your smartphone or tablet, use at least part of the time to practice your strategies. Just missed a red light? Reframe it as an opportunity to apply your strategies. Running late? The strategies might be even more useful.

Once you get into the habit of catching anxiety and using your coping strategies, begin to use stressors as a reminder. When you see your boss walking toward you, use your strategies before a conversation begins. If you see that a difficult relative is calling, letting go of any tension before you answer the phone. Put a sticky note on your computer where you receive email alerts.