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Chapter

Worry: The Root of Anxiety and Depression

Nearly everyone worries at least occasionally. About one in four people believe that they worry too much. While worry is usually thought to cause anxiety, it often leads to depression too. Whether we're worried or not, negative thinking usually leads to anxiety, depression, and sometimes other uncomfortable emotions such as embarrassment, guilt, and frustration. When anxiety interferes with the enjoyment of life, it can cause depression too. There are a number of other issues that can lead to depression and anxiety, such as hormone imbalances, genetics, side-effects of medication, and disease. While there appears to be a small genetic influence, worry is primarily a habit that is learned. People tend to "get used to" their worry habits and often don't realize how much those habits are affecting their mental and physical health.

Worry can be defined as thoughts or images that lead to anxiety or prevent relaxation and that are not productive. Planning and problem-solving involve productive thinking that may include some level of pressure or anxiety, but it's not necessary. Worries are typically useless thoughts that tend to be repetitive. Not only is it not productive, but worry has also been proven to interfere with problem-solving.

People who worry excessively and meet criteria for a disorder known as generalized anxiety disorder not only experience more anxiety and depression than others but are also more prone to many medical problems, including heart disease, headaches, and irritable bowel syndrome. Worry also puts you at risk for major depressive disorder, dysthymia (mild chronic depression), and other anxiety disorders that are often more severe, such as panic disorder, phobias, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

When we experience threat, our bodies gear us up to fight and run, so we can protect ourselves from harm. Sometimes anxiety is healthy in that it may help us to literally run or fight to survive. Other times, the anxiety may motivate us to get out of a bad situation, such as an unhealthy relationship or a toxic job. However, worry and anxiety that do not motivate us to protect ourselves are false alarms to the body. Our bodies react the same way to worry as they do to actual threat, but with nothing to fight and nowhere to run. This explains the connection between worry and medical problems as well as some of the uncomfortable symptoms that accompany worry, such as muscle tension.

Unfortunately, modern medicine often treats the symptoms of a problem rather than the cause. In this case, worried habits, negative thinking, and several other unhealthy habits are usually the cause of anxiety, depression, and medical problems, and patients are often medicated instead of being encouraged to change their habits. Worry, as the seed of so many mental health and medical problems, is usually overlooked, and seldom do physicians recommend to their patients that they see a cognitive-behavioral therapist to treat their worry.

Do You Have Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

1. Do you believe that your worry is uncontrollable? _____

2. Check the symptoms below that you experience at least sometimes:

- Difficulty concentrating

- Fatigue

- Insomnia

- Irritability

- Muscle tension

- Feeling keyed up, on edge, or nervous

Now circle the symptoms above that you experience more days than not.



Did you check at least three symptoms, circle at least two, and say yes to the first question?

If so, and if you have been bothered by these symptoms for at least six months, you probably have generalized anxiety disorder. If all the symptoms applied but you have had them for less than six months, you are probably just going through an adjustment period that could either resolve with time or lead to generalized anxiety disorder.

Often people develop generalized anxiety disorder in childhood or adolescence. However, it can start with a major life event, such as going to graduate school, having children, divorce, losing a loved one, or retirement. The good news is that treatment for generalized anxiety disorder is usually very effective without using medication (e.g., Borkovec, Newman, Pincus, & Lytle, 2002). Furthermore, when worry lifts, mood and health improve as well. There are two very important things to understand about the nature of worry and anxiety to begin to heal and form more relaxing and healthy habits. The first is that anxiety occurs in a spiral of interactions between thoughts, images, physical sensations, behaviors, and emotions. Waiting too long to intervene with coping strategies will usually render those strategies useless. The second important aspect of the nature of worry is that fighting it fuels it. **Many of the exercises and worksheets to come include ways to circumvent and even do the opposite of fighting it: surrender to or accept it.**

It is recommended that you work with a therapist who is well-trained in using cognitive-behavioral therapy and either mindfulness or dialectic behavioral therapy. However, using this workbook without the help of a therapist can be very helpful. One option is to use the workbook and, if you aren't happy with the results, see a therapist later.

Self-monitoring is a useful tool, as it has been proven to improve results. Some of the worksheets include self-monitoring, to help increase the likelihood that you will follow through on the advice. It will also help you to track your progress. I suggest that you use the simple monitoring form found on the next page at the end of each day.

