

# 6 Chapter

# Postpone Worry

The white bear research (see Chapter 2) taught us that we are terrible at not worrying. **Not only do our attempts to *not* worry fail but they can also cause us to think about our troubles even more, thereby increasing anxiety and depression.** However, we are actually pretty good at postponing worry. There are two general ways in which postponing can be effective. One is for a recurring worry such as work or children. The other is for the occasional big event that someone may worry about for days, weeks, or even months in advance. In the previous chapter, you learned to plan something specific as a way to problem-solve. Postponing is similar, but instead of planning a specific thing to do (e.g., “I’ll call my son’s teacher tomorrow on my lunch break”) you make a decision to think about your concern later (e.g., “I’m going to worry about work on my commute Monday morning”).

Regardless of whether you intend to use postponing on a regular basis or as an intermittent strategy, the steps are similar:

1. Make a decision that you do not want to think about this now.
2. Decide when you want to address your concern. Aim for problem-solving rather than worry.
3. Engage in a coping strategy to help let go of the worry.
4. When the worry comes up anyway, gently remind yourself that you are postponing the worry to the time you set aside and repeat the coping strategy.
5. Follow through with addressing the concern when that time comes around. Otherwise, the strategy may not be effective in the future. At this time, aim for solutions or a decision, instead of worrying.

So, let’s say that you are eating dinner with your family and you start to worry about work. You decide that you are going to think about this the next morning, on your 20-minute commute to work. You gently shift your attention to focusing on the smell of the food and the temperature and taste of what you are eating and drinking. When you get in the car the next morning, you address the concern and aim toward planning and problem-solving instead of worrying. For these types of worries use the upcoming Postponing Recurrent Worries worksheet.

Let’s say that your in-laws are planning a visit for the four-day Thanksgiving weekend. It’s August and you’re already worrying about it. Pick up the calendar and think about when you want to begin planning for Thanksgiving. After looking at the calendar, you decide that you are likely going to begin planning the Saturday before Thanksgiving, which is November 16. Anytime you begin worrying before that, gently remind yourself that you are going to think about that on November 16. Follow this with a coping strategy as needed. For this type of worry, use the Postponing Worry About an Event on page 26.

The goal is not to completely eradicate worry; rather, it’s to find a way to manage your worry so that it doesn’t significantly interfere with your functioning and enjoyment of life. **The goal is to significantly reduce the frequency, intensity, and length of time spent worrying.** Nonetheless, with postponing, you have more control

over when you are going to address these thoughts rather than them controlling you. In short, the goal is to pare worry down to a normal amount.

**TIPS:**

- If this is working well for recurring worries, try decreasing the frequency or length of your worry or problem-solving periods, or maybe both.
- If it isn't working well for recurring worries, make sure you give each session sufficient time to either get bored or find a resolution. Alternatively, try increasing the frequency or length of your sessions.
- Don't expect perfection. We think over 2,000 thoughts per hour on average. Also, the average healthy person worries 5–10% of the time. Therefore, it is best to accept the worries when they arise, with the goal of significantly reducing their frequency, intensity, and length.

For worries that involve a specific event or change in the future, a slightly different approach is needed. In an example based loosely on a real person, Pierre (a pseudonym) couldn't decide whether to return to his home country. He entered therapy early in March because he was very worried about making the right decision. He was so distressed with this worry that it was interfering with his concentration at work, his sleep, and kept causing him to feel very irritable. Thinking through all the pros and cons left him just as confused and he was unable to stop contemplating the issue. When I asked him when was the soonest he could possibly move back if he knew he was going to return home, he said November. Then I asked him when he'd start preparing for the move. He said the earliest he could apply for a visa would be October 1 and that it would take about a month for the visa to be approved. He agreed to wait until September 15 to start contemplating the decision and wrote a note in his calendar.

Anytime he started to worry about his decision, he said to himself, "I will begin worrying about this on September 15." This proved to be helpful in decreasing his worry and symptoms. I never found out whether Pierre returned home, because his anxiety and depression lifted by early summer. Postponing had been a helpful strategy for him. Other examples of worries for which you can use the postponing technique are starting school, giving a speech, visiting relatives, choosing a college, or deciding on when to retire or whether to move.

Another option for dealing with a worry is to repeatedly postpone it for a week, a month, a quarter, or any other chunk of time until a decision is made. If we have a big decision to make but no fixed date for it, such as whether to retire, whether to buy a car, or another decision that you are indecisive about, you can limit the amount of time you think about it by deciding *not* to decide for a specific time period. For example, if Pierre had been free to move anytime, he could have postponed his decision to the first Saturday of the month, the start of the next quarter, or another time period. Sometimes there is no clear, correct answer and contemplating for hours isn't going to get you any closer to a decision.

When you postpone your worries, you are controlling them, and often life brings you answers in between worry sessions as life changes or more information arises. When the date comes to which you postponed your worry, take time to contemplate, do research, or write about the decision. Continue to postpone until a decision is made. Write the date that you are going to contemplate in your calendar.

# Postponing Recurring Worries

1. What is your recurring worry (or worries) that you find difficult to control?

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2. In the past week, approximately how much time do you think you worried about this on average per day?

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3. Thinking about due diligence to problem-solve or process your emotions, how much time do you *want* to devote to thinking about this concern in a day? (I recommend that this number be between 5% and 10% of the current estimate, and at least 10 minutes.)

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4. When do you want to think about this? Good times include on your commute (or a portion of your commute if it is long), during your kids' nap time, during your shower, on a walk, or when you would normally worry most about this anyway.

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5. Write it in your schedule. Give the worry your full verbal attention. When we worry and when we problem-solve, we typically use the opposite side of our brain (the verbal side—usually the left side) from when we drive (the visual-spatial side—usually the right side). Therefore, most people feel safe addressing concerns while driving, and people who worry excessively usually worry while driving anyway. However, if this doesn't feel safe, choose another time.

6. When the worry arises outside of your designated time:

- a. Note the worry; taste it (remember not to fight it).
- b. Remind yourself of when you will address it.
- c. Gently apply a strategy for letting go of the worry. What is the strategy or strategies you will use to help manage the thoughts?

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7. After a week...how is this working?

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# Postponing Worry About an Event

1. What is the event that you are worrying about?

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2. What do you want to do to prepare for this event beforehand?

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3. When will you start preparing for the event?

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- If there is more than one step to preparing for this event, write each one in your calendar now.
- Anytime you start to worry about the event, remind yourself that you are postponing your worry to the selected date. Follow this with a brief coping strategy.
- (Optional) If your worry is about making a decision, write down a date to start contemplating, gathering information, researching, and so on. You may choose to set aside regular times to address it by using the previous worksheet.