



Wellbeing toolkit

Controlling worry

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Controlling worry

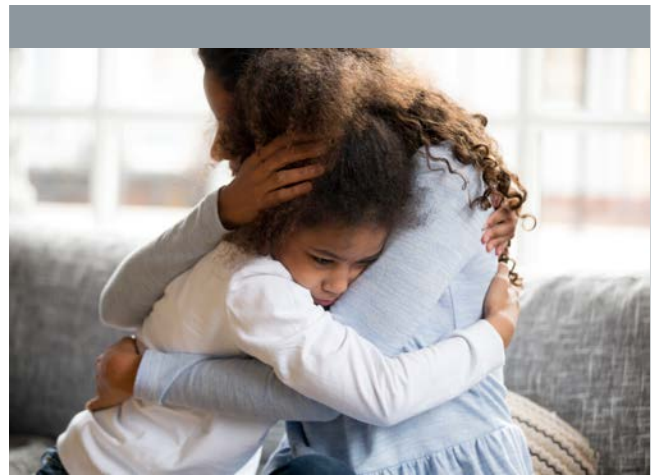
We all worry from time to time, but with the added health concerns of coronavirus and the changes to our daily lives we are all dealing with more stress and uncertainty.

Faced with such big changes and isolated from our support networks, it can be easy to fall into a spiral of worrying.

But worrying all the time can make it even harder to cope with an already challenging situation, and it can take its toll on our physical and mental health.

In this factsheet, we'll explore the different types of worry and strategies for keeping worry in check.

If you're concerned about your anxiety levels and feel your mental health is suffering, get in touch with your GP for additional support.



In this factsheet

- Understanding worry
- The physical impact of worry
- Your worry mindset
- Types of worry
- Techniques to control worry

Understanding worry

What is worry?

Worrying is when we keep going over something in our mind feeling uneasy or concerned about it and not really coming to any solution.

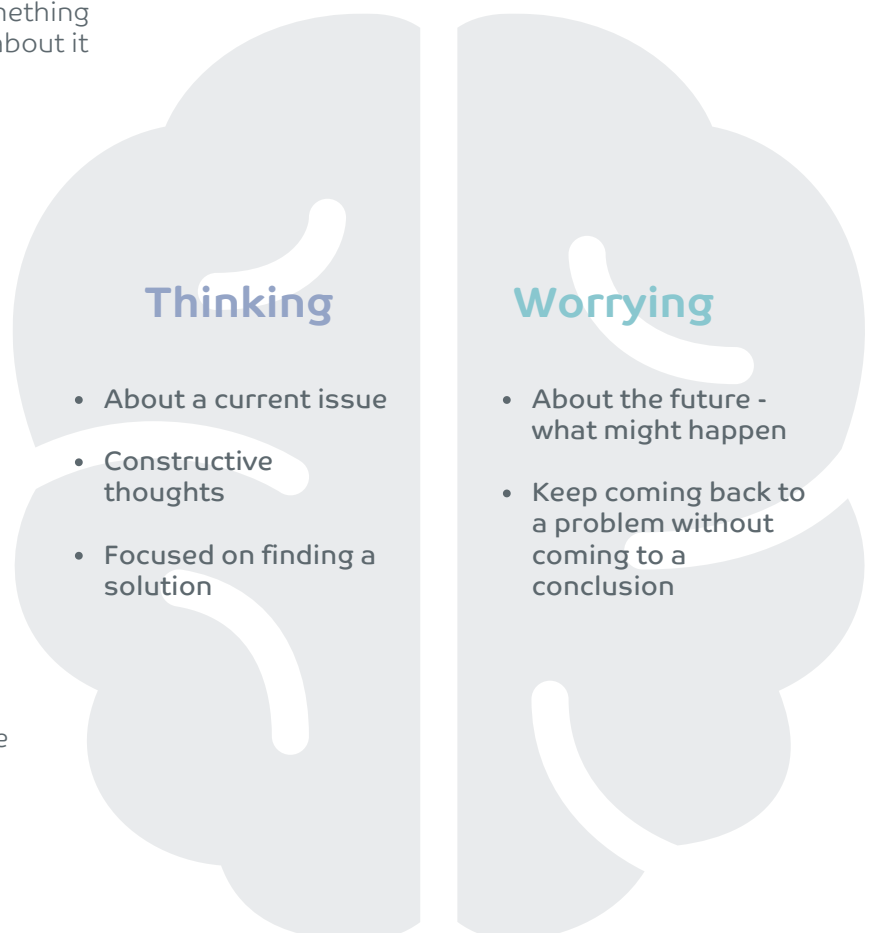
It's important to distinguish between worrying and thinking about something.

When we think about something, we're problem solving. Our thoughts are constructive, centred around managing the present situation and moving forward.

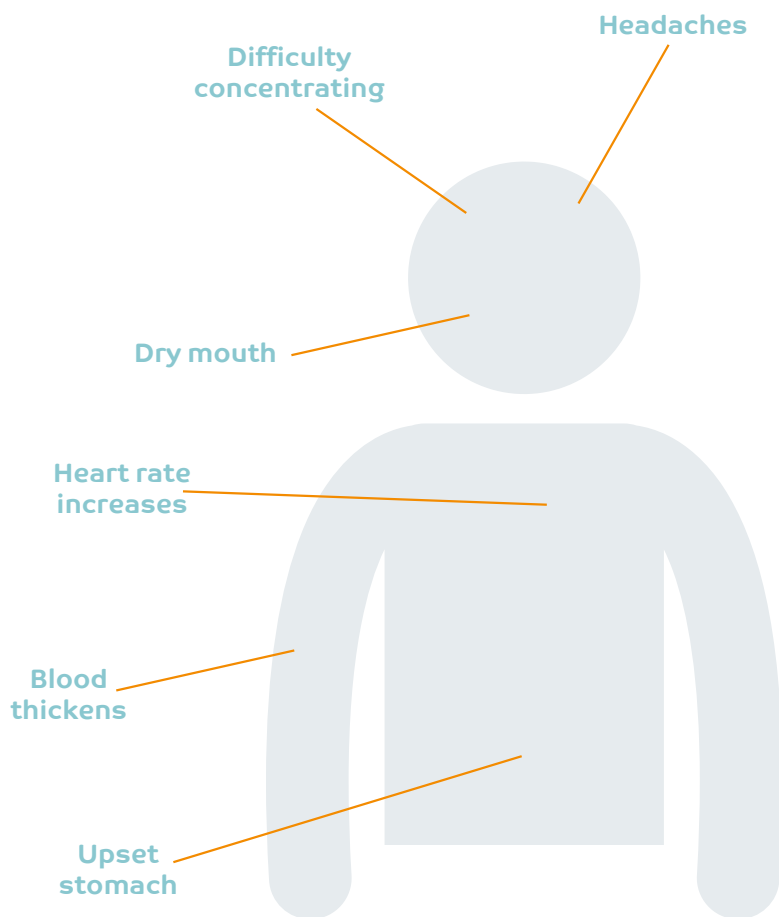
Worrying tends to be focused on the future, focused on what might happen. Rather than being solution focused, you tend to keep thinking about a problem without coming to any conclusions or solutions.

Worrying from time to time is common, but at the moment when our routines are disturbed, our support networks are far away and health risks are rampant, it's easy for worry to get out of control.

The first step to controlling worry is recognising it and labelling it.



What effect does worry have on the body?



We tend to think about worry as a mental state, but it has a huge impact on us physically too.

When we worry, it puts our body into fight or flight mode. This mode is designed for when we face extreme threatening situations.

As a result, the body shuts down non-priority systems, such as digestion and reproduction, whilst we deal with the threat.

Other processes are dialled up: your heart beats faster to get oxygen to major muscles; your blood thickens to better protect you if you're injured.

When we're really stressed and worrying, that means we may get physical symptoms such as headaches, dry mouth, racing heartbeat and difficulty concentrating.

Whilst this isn't harmful in a short-term, acute situation, if we get stuck in a worry loop with our fight or flight instinct constantly turned on then it takes its toll on those systems.

What's your worry mindset?

If worrying has become a common habit for you, take some time to think about your attitude towards worry.

Some people have negative beliefs about worry and others have learnt to see worry as a positive.

Those who see it as negative often find themselves worrying about how much they worry. This raises anxiety levels even more, creating a vicious cycle.

Others have started to condition themselves to see worry as positive - as a way of avoiding bad things happening or feeling prepared for all situations.

People in this category almost see worrying as an important responsibility that protects them.

Whether you see worry as negative or positive, it's important to reflect on how you see worry and how that might be contributing to your personal worry cycle.

Why is it so difficult to control worry at the moment?

One of the techniques that's usually recommended for controlling worry is to try and use evidence of past experiences or facts to assess how likely it really is that something bad will happen.

However, in the middle of the coronavirus outbreak this becomes a lot harder.

Rather than health worries being 'what ifs' that aren't very likely, there's a very real risk to our health and the health of our loved ones at the moment.

Controlling worry is just as important now that the risks are elevated.

If you spend hours a day reading all the breaking news stories and worrying about getting ill, it'll make isolation much more stressful.

Types of worry

Though what you worry about may be unique to you, the ways in which we worry are often similar.

These different ways of worrying are known as 'cognitive distortions'. Below are some examples of common worry patterns or cognitive distortions.

Take a look through the list and see if you can pinpoint which worry patterns you fall into most often.

"I should", "I must"

With this negative thought pattern, people tend to find themselves constantly falling short of their own expectations - however realistic or unrealistic they may be: "I must go to the gym more", "I should be doing that kind of thing with the kids". This style of thinking can lead to a lot of guilt and unhappiness.

Black and white thinking

It's rare that a situation is completely bad or completely good or that there's only one right solution to a problem. Black and white thinking can cause you to miss the nuance of a situation, only seeing it in terms of extremes rather than being able to neutrally evaluate all the possible solutions.

Emotional reasoning

We create our thoughts and emotions - they're not facts. When we use emotional reasoning, we're interpreting a situation based on how we feel at that given moment. For example, if you feel nervous, you may interpret the situation as dangerous and one to escape from, even if that's not necessarily the case.

Mental filtering

Our brains are anything but impartial. Whether it's being more likely to see negative things, selectively picking out information that suits our own perspective or even liking an idea more because it's our own, we see the world in a biased way.

With mental filtering, we often ignore the positive things or flip side to an argument in favour of information that confirms how we already feel or what we believe.

This in turn then creates a body of evidence that convinces us we're right to think that way.

Catastrophising

When we take a situation and immediately jump to the worst case scenario, we're catastrophising.

This worry style often means we end up spending our energy thinking about unlikely, extreme scenarios and allowing our worry to grow and grow.

If catastrophising becomes a habit, it can lead to being in a constant state of worry about everyday situations.

Overgeneralisation

Sometimes our past experiences or perceptions have a big impact on how we think about our current situation.

Overgeneralisation is when we use one small experience or piece of evidence to make a broad assumption.

For example, you made a small mistake the last time you were doing a presentation at work and you say to yourself "I'll do a terrible job again this time, I'm awful at presenting, maybe I shouldn't be doing a job where there's any presenting, I should leave".

Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow. It empties today of its strength.

Corrie ten Boom

Techniques to control worry

There are many different techniques that can be used to help us control worrying.

Just as worries are different person by person, the best way to control them will vary too.

Don't get disheartened if you try one of these and it doesn't work - try another one on the list instead until you find one that works for you.

Recognise and label the worry

Just recognising that you've started to worry can help you take a step back and prevent that worry from escalating. Analysing the worry and seeing if it fits one of the unhelpful thinking styles on pages 6 and 7 can also help you to keep control by analysing the worry in a more detached way; it can also help you get to know your common worry patterns and catch the situation even earlier next time.

Write it out

Sometimes worries go round and round in our head because we don't take the time to reflect on them and acknowledge them. Writing out your thoughts can be a good way to unpick the different aspects of your worry and maybe uncover parts of it you didn't recognise before, helping you to address these and move on.

Schedule worry time

If you find yourself constantly worrying throughout the day, it can really take its toll and distract you from other day-to-day activities. Rather than allowing worry to take over your day, put aside 20 minutes in the afternoon or early evening to acknowledge and concentrate on your concerns. Over time, this helps you break the habit of constant worrying and gives you more opportunities to enjoy life.

Meditation

Rather than interacting with your worries and going over them, meditation is about observing what's in your mind at a given moment without trying to change it. It's a great way to practise detaching yourself from worry and being in the present moment rather than being controlled by 'what if'.

Exercise

Exercise helps to control worry in two ways. It acts as a distraction - it's hard to worry whilst physically exerting yourself and trying to follow an online class. After you've finished the body also releases feel-good endorphins that help boost your mood.

Limit online time

Staying up to date with the latest news and advice is important, but when we're at home it's easy to slip into spending a lot of time on our phones checking the latest stories or scrolling through social media. Use the screen time limit settings on your phone or download a screen time app to keep an eye on how much time you're spending online on your phone.

Mood hacks

You'll find many lists online with suggestions of things you can do to relax and de-stress. But just as stress is highly personal, so are the things that boost our mood. Start a list of 'mood hacks' - your personal list of the things that make you smile and boost your mood. When you start to feel worry creeping in, take a look at your list of mood hacks and pick the one that can help you switch off the worry in that moment.

Decide if the worry is hypothetical

Some worries are grounded in real-life challenges that we're facing and need to address; others are hypothetical - 'what if' worries. When you find yourself worrying, take a moment to think about whether it's hypothetical or not. If it's something that can be addressed, grab some paper and a pen and start focusing on solutions to help move you from worrying to problem solving. If it's hypothetical, try some of the other techniques on this list to challenge the thought and move on.

Wellbeing toolkit

This factsheet is part of our Wellbeing Toolkit aimed at helping teams stay well during the coronavirus outbreak.

Each week, a new pair of factsheets covering mental and physical wellbeing is released.

Take a look at westfieldhealth.com/covid-19 for access to all resources.