



Why Worry?

Worry does not feel good and most of us will do our best to avoid it if we can. If our bodies had switches, then surely we would all choose to set the switch for worry to off! But alas, we do not have switches and in our everyday lives we are often forced to suffer the unpleasant feeling of worry. Our bodies seem to take over without consulting us, indeed they sometimes seem to be acting against us.

Other people can try to make us feel better and you will recognize some of the things they say:

- Ψ "Cheer up it may never happen"
- Ψ "Why not give up it's not worth bothering"
- Ψ "Have a stiff drink"
- Ψ "Watch some telly and take your mind off it"
- Ψ "Go out for a walk"
- Ψ "You need a big hug"
- Ψ "I know just how you feel"
- Ψ "Let's talk about it and get it off your chest"
- Ψ "Get a good night's sleep"

But even if you feel better briefly, the worry returns. This begs the questions, "What's going on?" "Why should I have to put up with this?" "What can I do about it?"

What is going on?

This question is easily answered. We have two nervous systems in our bodies; the Voluntary Nervous System and the Involuntary Nervous System. These are scientifically known as the Somatic Nervous System and the Autonomic Nervous System respectively.

The voluntary nervous system is well behaved. It does what it is told. Most parts of our body that we can see, will move if we tell

General Feature

Anxiety

them to and stay still if we want them to. We can carry out many actions just by thinking about them, like running, jumping, sitting, standing, playing the piano. No problem there, we are in control.

So what about this other nervous system? Are we in control with

sick to your stomach. Not nice is it? So why should you put up with all this?

Why should I have to put up with this?

The world in which humans evolved was a dangerous place and if we were to survive then we needed to avoid dangerous situations as much as possible and get out of danger fast if a dangerous situation actually occurred. This was so important that it could not be left up to us to consciously decide if there was danger and whether to react to it. It was left up to our brains to act on their own without consulting us. It is a fact that most of what our brains do they do without consulting us in any way. On many occasions if we had to think

It may help to consider what the connection is between worry and learning.

- Ψ If there is little or no worry then learning doesn't happen. The person is too laid back, too relaxed, too peaceful.
- Ψ If worry is increased then learning starts to take place. Concentration improves, memory is better and problem solving becomes more interesting.

So, we might say if we increase worry and learning gets better we need to keep on increasing it. What actually happens is that if worry is too high learning does not increase, it starts to deteriorate.

- Ψ At very high levels of worry learning doesn't happen.

So there is a level of worry that is just right for learning. Worry is not all bad, it is necessary to support learning in everyday life. Without it nothing much would get done. On the other hand, too much worry is definitely bad. It prevents many everyday activities and it can lead to illness. This is because our brains have evolved to take the line that if something is *that* worrying, it must take priority over any learning.

What can I do about worry?

We now understand that the feeling we call worry is not under our control. It cannot be switched off just because we do not like it. We also know that it means our brains have detected some sort of danger that we might try and identify and deal with. Lastly we know that our involuntary nervous system is sending out messages



this one? The answer is definitely no, we are not in control. Sometimes the more you try to control it, the worse it makes you feel and it's just awful. This nervous system makes you shake and stumble over your words, when you want to stay calm and steady, it makes you blush and so lets everyone know what you are thinking, it makes you want to run away and it can make you feel

about how to react it would be too late. So the answer to the question "Why should I put up with this?" is because this is the way you are made. But of course there is more to it than this. The fact is if you don't worry you don't do anything. Worry makes us do things and it is doing things that gives us a better and safer life. One of the important things we all do is to learn.

to parts of our bodies we cannot see and making them change what they are doing. Examples are messages to our stomach and intestines telling them to stop churning over and giving us “butterflies,” messages to our hearts to beat faster and to the muscles that control breathing to contract more quickly bringing about a nervy, jittery sensation.

What we need to do is look at all the possible ways of dealing with worry and decide how useful they really are. To make the job easier we can put all the different approaches into one of three groups.

Approaches that are either...
Physical, Chemical or
Thinking.

Physical Approaches

1. **Breathing exercises**- if worry makes you breathe too fast, it might help to attempt to breathe more slowly.
2. **Yoga**- this is a more holistic approach that attempts to put more control on the involuntary nervous system by training in meditation and manipulation of the body
3. **Massage**- the aim is to replace unpleasant sensations with more pleasant ones and to relax all the muscles.

Chemical Approaches

1. **Smoking**- this floods the brain with the powerful drug nicotine which smokers say gives rise to a feeling of relaxation and relief from worry. There is some doubt that this is true.
2. **Alcohol**- ethyl alcohol is a chemical that depresses the

nervous system and can reduce worry

3. **Prescription drugs**- doctors can prescribe effective drugs that are specifically aimed at lowering feelings of worry
4. **Street drugs**-drugs such as cannabis, cocaine, heroin can reduce the feelings of worry
5. **Aromatherapy**- this is really a kind of chemical therapy because the oils used do have a direct effect on the brain.

Thinking Approaches (among psychologists this is called cognitive approaches)

1. **CBT** (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) - the idea is to keep worry in check by becoming aware of the kind of irrational thinking that can raise worry levels to completely inappropriate levels. People can get into a vicious circle of thinking when they start to worry about how worried they are and this worries them even more and so on. People say to themselves “I *must* do this or I will be a failure” or “I *should* keep working or I will let everyone down” or “I *ought* to turn up or they will not like me” This kind of

negative self talk can lead to worry and, if continued, ever escalating levels of worry.

2. **Counselling**- the idea here is to guide the person who feels anxious to ask what is making them so anxious and to get them to come up with practical suggestions aimed at reducing the worry.



3. **Reading**- there are hundreds of books aimed at helping people reduce their level of worry.
4. **Humour**-it is almost impossible to worry and laugh at the same time. Comedians certainly help to reduce worry.

General Feature

Anxiety

The first thing to notice about these approaches is how much time and money is spent on putting them in place. People will spend a lot of money in an attempt to relieve their worry. There are many people employed as therapists, counsellors and in the leisure industry who are ultimately trying to help people to feel better not to mention happier and less worried.

What to do if worry levels get too high?

The first thing to do is decide if the worry is interfering in your everyday life and you never feel without worry. If your behaviour is changing so that you and others notice a change then that is the time to get help. If you have thoughts of self harm, because

you cannot bear the worry, then you need help urgently.

It may be that your employer or people around you have noticed that you work harder if you are worried about losing your job or not getting promotion. In these circumstances you could be open to exploitation and bullying and you may need help to get yourself out of the situation.

The person who has the expertise to help you and who can bring in more help if necessary is your general practitioner (GP). All the more effective approaches for lowering the level of worry described above are only accessible through your doctor. They can refer you for CBT if they and you think it would be helpful. Only doctors can prescribe drugs that are safe and effective at lowering worry levels.

If you smoke, drink alcohol, take illegal drugs or just give up on trying, then you may reduce your worry, but at a cost that you may decide is too much and may in the long run create more worry than it relieves.

Like it or not worry is a necessary part of everyday living. Without worry we would not want to do anything and this would present a dangerous situation that would threaten our wellbeing. Hopefully it helps to recognise worry for what it is and on most days say "It is not nice but I can tolerate it." If there are times when worry has taken over and nothing seems to make it tolerable then be assured that help is available and do not hesitate to go to your doctor.

