

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Whittling Worry Down To Size

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My wife freely admits her propensity for worry. Not that she's a worry wart. Far from it. She takes most things in stride. But ever now and then she embarks on some serious worrying.

We were sitting together at a conference one day when a speaker took up the topic of anxiety. He was pointing out how little we gain from worry. "After all," he said, "eighty percent of what we worry about never happens." Immediately Fran nudged me, leaned over, and said triumphantly, "See, it works!!"

Despite her humorous defense of worry and its benefits, few people find worry particularly desirable. Most of us would be fully satisfied to go the rest of our lives without ever worrying again.

Yet, worry we do. Some of us more habitually than others. And when worry gets a grip on us, it can be relentless, robbing us of sleep, health, and the basic enjoyment of life. So what can we do, at a practical level, to hold worry in check and take away its stranglehold? Here are some practical suggestions.

1. Get specific about the worry.

Underneath all worry is a sense that something we value is threatened. Worry typically words that threat in expressions that are highly generalized or ambiguous. "I'm worried about our marriage." "I'm worried about my job." "I'm worried about retirement." "I'm worried that something is wrong."

When threats are this generalized, we can't battle them effectively. So state your worry more precisely. Get to the specific threat. "I'm worried that the company is going to outsource my job in the next budget cycle." "I'm worried that my job function will be obsolete within a year." "I'm worried that the new ownership will bring in their own person for my position."

When you word the threat this way, it's more clearly identified. It's more narrowly defined. It's more easily visualized. All of which makes it easier to develop a plan to counter it.

But we're not specific enough yet. The thing you are worried about is not a "stand-alone" threat. It harbors consequences that could also bring harm to things you value. So, let's get specific about those consequences, too.

2. Make a list of ill effects you fear from the threat.

Don't just recite these ill effects in your mind. Write them down on a sheet of paper. Make a column in which you list them one after another. (Incidentally, this is not an exercise in creative writing. You're not writing down EVERYTHING you can imagine going wrong. You're listing only ill effects that 1) you consider a genuine possibility and 2) which unsettle you enough that they trigger anxiety or fear.)

Let's take the case of your job being outsourced. Should that happen, you might not find another position inside the company. And if you go months without employment, you could possibly exhaust your savings. You might even lose your house. To the degree these possibilities disturb you, they belong on your list, along with other concerns that come to mind.

At this point be prepared for a pleasant surprise. Just writing your worries down is likely to ease your level of anxiety. Once your worries are on paper, where you can "look at them," they somehow become less ominous. They lose much of their grip. But we're not through yet. We're going to reduce the worry even further.

3. Beside each item, identify the odds of it happening.

Continuing the example above, first ask, "What are the odds my job will be outsourced?" Perhaps you rate it at 30%. If that happens, what are the odds you will be unable to find another position in the company. After reflection you rate that likelihood at 50%. If you can't find another job soon, what are the odds you'll need to dip into savings? You see that as a 65% likelihood. And how likely is it that you will be out of work so long you lose your house? You weigh those odds at less than 10%.

Just putting these percentages beside each item helps notch your worry down another level. A moment ago you were saying, "I'm worried they will outsource my job." Now you are saying, "There's a one-in-three chance they'll outsource my job, but even then there's a 50-50 chance there will be another place for me in the company." Effectively that reduces your odds of being on the street without a job to 15%. Those are manageable odds, wouldn't you say?

And if your odds of becoming unemployed are that small, imagine how remote the possibility of losing your house due to protracted unemployment. The odds of that happening are now so small as to be insignificant. Certainly not worthy of further worry.

4. Look for ways to increase your odds.

Next, focus your attention on the items on your list that carry the gravest risks or consequences. Your objective now is to find ways to reduce those risks and put yourself in a position of greater strength. For instance, if you currently have a 50-50 chance of finding another position in your company, what can you do to raise your odds to 60%? Or 70%? Perhaps you could expand your network of friendships in the company. Or you could work at developing additional skills or expertise you know the company needs. Write those possibilities down. Continue this exercise with the more significant risks on your list. For each one try to identify three concrete steps you might take to give yourself better odds.

5. Develop a proactive plan of action.

Once you've compiled this list of possible actions, reflect on them carefully. From everything you've listed, choose two or three concrete steps that hold the greatest promise of putting you in a more advantaged position. Choose only actions that you can initiate immediately. Then go to work on them today. And stick with your plan. Work it every day. It's amazing how much you can minimize worry merely by taking proactive action.

6. Search out hidden opportunities.

So far we've talked about fending off threats, which inevitably leads to a negative state of mind. Before we conclude, therefore, let's do something to set a more positive tone. Look back over your list of "things that could go wrong" — particularly the ones you are most concerned about — and ask, "If this were to happen, what new possibilities might open up for me?"

As an example, losing your job might give you an opportunity to explore that new career field you've been musing about. Or being unemployed for a while would give you the time to finish that project in the garage. Again, write down these opportunities as they come to mind. Build a list of all the good things that might happen, even if your worst fears are realized. There's much truth to the old adage, "Every cloud has a silver lining." Find the silver linings in advance and you deny worry much of its clout.

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