

# How Worry Works

## Worry and Problematic Worry

Worry is generally regarded as a form of verbal mental problem solving about potentially negative future events. Normal worry is generally short-lived and leads to positive problem-solving behaviour. Worry becomes unhelpful when it is about a number of things, is very frequent, and is difficult to control or dismiss.

Prolonged or frequent worry generates more anxiety and more worry, which may actually prevent positive thinking and action.

## What Triggers Worry?

Worrying can be triggered by various things. Some triggers may be more obvious and linked to external things, for example:

- Seeing a certain image (e.g. in the newspaper or on TV)
- Hearing certain information (e.g., on the radio or in a conversation)
- Being put in a certain situation (e.g., having to make decisions, perform a task, lead others, or face uncertainty)

Some triggers may be less obvious. These may be thoughts or images that seem to just pop into your head out of the blue. An initial “What if...” question that comes to mind for no apparent reason, can even be a trigger for worrying. For example, the thought “What if I left the iron on?” might pop into my head. If I think “I probably didn’t” and decide not to worry about it, chances are I will forget about it, and the thought will slip my mind. However, if instead I start to ‘chase’ the thought further (e.g., “The ironing board might catch fire and that will spread to the whole house.” “The house might burn down and then I will lose everything!”), then the original “What if...” question has now triggered a worry episode.



## What Maintains Worry?

People who describe themselves as chronic worriers are often disturbed that they seem to spend much of their waking hours worrying excessively about a number of different life circumstances. They do not understand why this activity continues. They often ask, “Why do I do it?” and “What keeps my worrying going?” There are two types of thoughts or beliefs about worry which work to maintain the worry, in a vicious cycle. These are

negative beliefs about worrying, and positive beliefs about worrying. Unhelpful strategies such as avoidance and thought control also maintain worry.

### **Negative Beliefs About Worrying**

In addition to the specific things people worry about, people with generalised anxiety disorder may also worry about the fact that they are worrying.

In this case, such worriers are often concerned that worrying is “bad” and may believe that:

- Worrying is uncontrollable, and will take over and result in a loss of control (e.g., “I won’t be able to control my worrying, and it will never stop”).
- Worrying is dangerous, and will cause either physical or mental harm (e.g., “If I keep worrying like this I will go crazy/ have a breakdown/become ill”). Holding these (false) negative beliefs about worrying makes the process of worrying very distressing for you, and this will even keep your worrying going. Positive Beliefs About Worrying Worriers often hold (false) positive beliefs that worrying is beneficial and “good,” which can keep worriers worrying. Some positive beliefs may be:
  - Worrying motivates me to do things
  - Worrying helps me find solutions to problems
  - Worrying prepares me for the worst
  - Worrying helps me avoid bad things
  - Worrying prevents bad things

### **Avoidance and Thought Control**

Avoidance may take the form of avoiding a feared outcome (e.g., passing up a promotion to avoid the feared outcome of not doing a good job) or avoiding worrying itself (e.g., not watching the TV news in case a worry is triggered, or asking for reassurance from loved ones that nothing bad will happen to you).

Avoidance limits a person’s opportunity to have experiences that disconfirm their worries and their beliefs about worrying. In a sense, not confronting your worries keeps the worrying going. People who worry often attempt unsuccessfully to control their worrisome thoughts in a number of ways. These may include trying to suppress their worries, trying to reason with their worrisome thoughts, distracting themselves or thinking positively. These attempts at thoughtcontrol rarely work, as trying to suppress a thought usually has the opposite effect of making that thought occur more, which in turn fuels the belief that worries are uncontrollable.