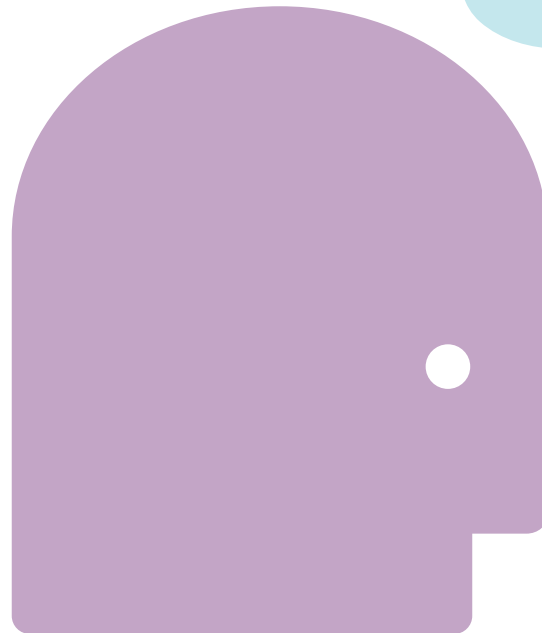




**Sophie Williams
Coaching**

Less worry. More calm.

Find more calm
**Ten ways to tackle
a worry habit**



Introduction

Most of us worry. We worry about all sorts of things: relationships, family, school grades, job performance, health issues, finances, what people think of us, politics, the state of the world, natural disasters and more. It's completely normal to have worry thoughts – it's a function of how our brain is designed. Worry arises from our perception of threat and danger, for ourselves and those we love. It's how we try to anticipate problems and try to control an uncertain future. But worry can also become a chronic habit.

If worry does become more persistent, the stress can impact our mental and physical health. Habitual worriers often complain of headaches, sleep problems, fatigue or gut issues. A worry habit can make us less able to think clearly or take decisions; it can impact on work and relationships; it can cause more emotional distress and prolong negative moods. It can lead to unrealistic fears, feelings of helplessness and causing increased anxiety in others. Worry makes us less able to cope and less able to help others.

When something unpredictable and unsettling occurs over a period of time – like the pandemic – it can obviously make a worry habit worse. The pandemic has also led to increased levels of health anxiety and financial concerns. For some people, ecoanxiety around climate change has contributed to their burden of worry. And many people are also feeling grief as a result of the global changes – for the loss of people they love, for the loss of livelihoods, for the loss of normality and for unfulfilled expectations.



Anxiety is a valid response to big and uncertain events – but feeling consistently overwhelmed could also be a sign of a mental or physical health issue that needs addressing, so do seek appropriate professional support if you need it.

Being a worrier is not a defect or inadequacy; it's just the way our system responds to stress. Learning how to deal with worry is important as it helps us when a challenging situation does need our attention – so we know how to find calm and take more effective action. This short guide can help you to start tackling your worry habit, with some practical tips you can begin using straight away.

The mind is not set up to understand probability; it's set up to avoid disaster.

Roy Baumeister

The brain is like Velcro for negative experiences, but Teflon for positive ones.

Dr Rick Hanson

The human mind is automatically attracted to the worst possible case, often very inaccurately.

Martin Seligman

Generally, the rational brain can override the emotional brain as long as our fears don't hijack us.

Bessel van der Kolk

Why do we worry?

Worrying arises from the way the human brain has evolved since our earliest ancestors – it keeps scanning for survival threats and alerting us to potential troubles. When we meet an immediate threat like an oncoming car, our body has an emergency reaction system called the 'fight, flight or freeze' response that help us get out of harm's way. However, our stress responses weren't designed for dealing with ongoing anxiety, or endless worry thoughts. Our brains are trying to protect us, but sometimes at the expense of our health and happiness .

The way our brains work means that just thinking about a negative possibility, however unlikely, can create a stress reaction¹ in the body – brain imaging research shows that imagining a threat lights up similar regions as experiencing it does. Our worry thoughts can make us feel as if we're in danger when we're actually safe. We have a default tendency to pay most attention to all things negative – our 'negativity bias'. Sometimes worry signals that something needs our attention, but an anxious mind isn't good at problem-solving, making decisions or planning.

Worrying about what other people think about us is also part of our evolutionary inheritance – our early ancestors needed to get on with people in their communities, as being banished was a certain death sentence. Nowadays, with social media, our 'tribes' can be huge and global – making it hard for our brains to deal with. Social anxiety is linked to a fear of judgment. Any unkind comment, even if online and from a stranger, still feels threatening and painful.

¹ Affects of stress video: www.ted.com/talks/sharon_horesh_bergquist_how_stress_affects_your_body

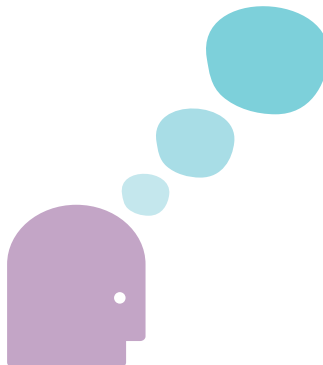
Why do some people worry more than others?

Research has found that there seems to be some inherited component that increases the risk of being more anxious, but life experiences determine how this increased risk manifests. Family history, childhood trauma, health issues, loneliness, stressful lifestyles and difficult life events can all be contributory factors. The brain uses past experiences to predict the future, so negative events and memories can impact on how we perceive issues in our lives.

Any situation that is interpreted as threatening or intensely emotional can leave their mark – resulting in a brain that perceives the world as a dangerous place. Worry-prone people tend to have overactive ‘alarm systems’ and interpret even ambiguous or neutral cues as negative. Chronic worriers often blame themselves (unnecessarily) for having a worry habit.

Many worriers are prone to rumination: compulsively thinking about abstract questions that cannot be solved (eg *"Why do these things happen to me?"*) or constantly replaying a hurtful situation from the past. Taking time to reflect on past experiences can help problem-solving, but the brooding type of rumination can lead to depression.

Uncontrollable and excessive worrying about a number of different things can be a symptom of generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), so contact your GP if this applies to you.



Why is a worry habit so hard to stop?

Changing any entrenched habit can be tricky. Habits can seem so familiar that they feel like part of our identity (eg *"I'm a born worrier"*). Sometimes worrying feels like a way of taking action, when we don't know what else to do. Worriers often hold underlying beliefs about how it's useful or important, including: *"if I expect the worst, I won't be disappointed"*; *"worrying will prevent bad things happening"*; *"if I worry about others, it shows I care about them"*; *"if something is making me anxious, it must be a threat that I need to worry about"*; or *"worrying about what might happen will make sure I'm prepared"*.

Breaking a worry habit can be difficult if you hold beliefs that you really do need to worry because something bad could happen if you stop. Struggling to keep a grip actually maintains the anxiety. Some worriers are constantly trying to work out the cause of their anxiety (which can lead to rumination) – but it's possible to overcome a worry habit without knowing that.

If you identify as a worrier, habit change can feel like an identity change. Our habits can also be kept in place by cues from our environment and the expectations of our social groups. For some worriers, the prospect of no longer belonging in a certain 'tribe' is stronger than the desire for change.

An anxious brain also makes it harder to evaluate risks and keep things in perspective. Worriers often avoid certain situations that make them anxious – leading them to believe that avoidance is keeping them safe, but it merely shrinks their comfort zone. Challenging unhelpful beliefs can contribute to overcoming a worry habit, leading to more inner ease and confidence.

Tips

1. Check your worry level

Sometimes people don't recognise how their worry habit is affecting them as it's second nature to them. It's helpful to look at what's going on by doing a quick check-in scan from time to time (maybe 2-3 times a day). This isn't about constant self-analysis; just tuning in to observe your current state.

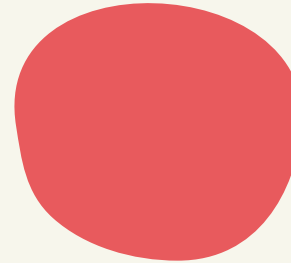
Ask yourself, 'How am I doing?' Start noticing how you feel, what you need and what you can do to help yourself. You can learn to identify your own signs of overwhelm (eg disturbed sleep) and what your personal triggers are (eg doomscrolling or having too many plates spinning).

You can use the scale for a quick reference. Are you in the green zone? Or are you edging into the amber zone? Is your body feeling relaxed or tense? Are trying to deal with too much? Do you need more support? Do you need to introduce some additional self-care measures? If you're moving up towards the red zone, please seek professional help.



Using the tips: If you're feeling anxious, start with the self-soothing, body-orientated approaches (eg Soft-Belly Breathing or The Butterfly Hug). Tips 5-10 are aimed at introducing new mental habits and building resilience. Our brains are always changing (neuroplasticity), so consistent practice of new behaviours and thinking creates new neural pathways – resulting in more helpful habits.

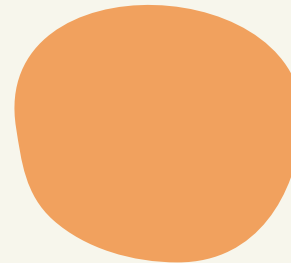
Worry traffic-lights self-assessment



Severe

Very anxious and struggling. High disruption of normal life activities, such as trouble sleeping and eating; feeling tearful and/or withdrawn; many negative thoughts etc.

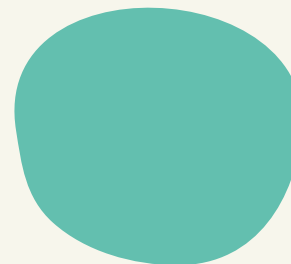
Seek professional help.



Moderate

Feeling more anxious; e.g. more edgy and reactive; sleep issues; more worrisome thinking etc.

What can help: Pay attention to self-care (reduce stressors and improve lifestyle habits) and get more support (talk to sympathetic people; find professional help if necessary). Check out the suggestions in this book for different ways of tackling worry.



Healthy/OK

Generally good, with only occasional worry. Involved in a range of activities and maintaining social interactions.

What can help: Continue to check-in with yourself every day and maintain okay-ness with healthy lifestyle habits. You could also introduce some new helpful habits (see following tips).

2. Breathe slowly

Using your breathe is one of the easiest proven techniques to alleviate anxiety. Many people shallow breath, or even hold their breathe, when feeling challenged. Intentionally breathing more slowly for a few moments, with longer exhales, lets your body know you are safe. It activates your relaxation mode (parasympathetic system) – and this actually alters the expression of genes in the immune system in a beneficial way, as well as reducing blood pressure. You can find various methods described online via the NHS website and other reputable sources.

A technique recommended by trauma expert Dr James Gordon to quiet the stress response is Soft-Belly Breathing. As you breath in through the nose and out through the mouth, you think “soft” on the inhales and “belly” on the exhales. This reminds us to relax our belly, so we can take in full relaxing breaths. You can put your hands on your belly to feel the sensations of expansion and deflation with the breath.

Slow breathing is like an anchor in the midst of an emotional storm; the anchor won't make the storm go away, but it will hold you steady until it passes.

Dr Russ Harris

Just when you feel you have no time to relax, know that this is the moment you most need to make time to relax.

Matt Haig

Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.

Arthur Ashe

3. Move your body

When your mind interprets something as a threat, the stress response it provokes in your body changes your body's biochemistry to give you energy to fight or run away. Studies show that exercise and movement, which use this energy, help reduce the symptoms of anxiety. Also, regular exercise has a multitude of other benefits – including boosting our cardiovascular and immune systems; promoting better sleep; and helping our brains too.

Try going for a run or brisk walk; doing a fun dance/exercise routine from YouTube; or anything else you enjoy. Dr Gordon also advocates shaking and dancing – “*using intense, disruptive effort and free movement to help us shed stress and tension*” – so you can try whole-body shivering movements or shaking like a wet dog, and dancing to your favourite music.

**Enjoy the little things.
For one day you may look
back and realize they
were the big things.**

Robert Brault

**There are days I drop words
of comfort on myself like
falling leaves and remember
that it is enough to be taken
care of by myself.**

Brian Andreas

**Worry never robs
tomorrow of its
sorrow; it only saps
today of its joy.**

Leo Buscaglia

4. Gentle self-soothing

Touch can be a powerful tool for calm – just think of a comforting hug or a relaxing massage. Our bodies respond to soothing touch by producing more of the hormone oxytocin, which is associated with greater relaxation and reduced anxiety. Try the following quick and easy techniques.

Stroking method

Crossing your arms, start stroking down your upper arms all the way to your wrists for a few minutes. You can also stroke your hands, from wrists to finger tips. Or stroke your forehead with both hands, from the centre line to the temples. Or run a finger gently over your lips. Or ‘wash’ your face: gently run both hands upwards from your cheeks, over the top of your head and down the back of your neck. Explore what works best for you.

The Butterfly Hug

This is another simple self-soothing method: cross your arms across your chest, so the middle finger of each hand reaches below your collarbone. Keep your hands on your chest, pointing upwards – you can interlock your thumbs if you wish. Gently alternate moving each hand in turn to tap yourself, so that your hands stimulate the flapping wings of a butterfly. Find videos online to see it demonstrated.

5. Name your worry

Just as in the Disney-Pixar movie 'Inside Out', you can allocate a character to your worry habit.

This character represents the over-zealous 'health-and-safety monitor' part of you which is trying to protect you from harm. You can give it a name (eg, Aunt Elsie) to help you recognise it. Some people select animals (eg, a fiercely protective tiger) as their worry symbol/mascot. As the worry characters are only 'advisors', you can choose to take your own decision about what they are saying; eg "*Thanks Aunt Elsie for your concern but I've got this.*"

If you don't want to use a character, you can do a naming practice called 'noting'. This is mentally labelling any worry thoughts, regardless of the specific content, as 'Worry'. Don't analyse the worries in any way or make any judgement, just note "*Worry is happening*". By stepping back in this way, you can gradually learn to catch your mind's behaviour earlier, before you engage in a longer period of worrisome thinking. Once you've noticed what's happening, you can choose to do something else with your attention instead.

Worry is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do but never gets you anywhere.

Erma Bombeck

It ain't no use putting up your umbrella till it rains!

Alice Caldwell Rice

Instead of worrying about what you cannot control, shift your energy to what you can create.

Roy Bennett

6. Allocate a 'worry time'

This technique (from Penn State University researchers) has been very effective for many people. Schedule a set time and place for worrying (not night-time or in the bedroom). Use this worry time (about 15 minutes) to go over your 'worry list' and decide if you need to action any of them. Remind yourself that the rest of the day is a worry-free zone.

Every time a worry comes up outside of worry time, just tell yourself you'll deal with it during your scheduled session. With practice, it will become easier to worry less often.

When we take time to notice the things that go right – it means we're getting a lot of little rewards during the day.

Martin Seligman

7. Challenge unhelpful thinking

Our survival-focused minds have a negativity bias – we're 'wired for negativity' as neuropsychologist, Rick Hanson puts it – which makes us prone to having worry thoughts.

In addition, we often have unhelpful thinking patterns: such as catastrophising (imagining the worse); filtering (seeing the negatives and ignoring the positives); polarised thinking (all-or-nothing thinking); and emotional reasoning ('I feel it, therefore it must be true'). Also, our risk perception is poor; we can get over-alarmed about some threats, yet ignore others. Many of our negative feelings "*are in fact based on such thinking errors*" according to renowned psychiatrist David Burns.

Managing unhelpful thinking patterns

- **Challenge worry thoughts** – don't jump to conclusions and focus on facts: *Is this thought true? Is there a more helpful way to see this situation? What's the probability of this actually happening? What else is possible?*
- **Put it in Perspective** – Martin Seligman, founder of Positive Psychology, suggests imagining the worst possible situation, followed by thinking about the best case scenario and then considering what the most likely outcome could be. You can plan for the most realistic scenario.
- **Give your worrisome thought threads a name** – eg, I'm in my 'it's going to be a disaster' story – to see that they are just habitual thoughts.
- **Spend less time with other worriers** – we can be influenced by other people's negative moods via social contagion, according to University of Warwick researchers.
- **Ration your 'bad news' consumption** – the media regularly use our negativity bias to grab our attention. Stick to facts from credible sources and look for uplifting stories to balance your view.
- **Train your brain to be more positive** – by writing down three good things that happened, or that you're grateful for, at the end of each day. Studies show that gratitude reduces anxiety and even helps change the neural structure of the brain. And remember to really savour good moments, as positive experiences take longer to get stored to memory.
- **Take care of how you talk to yourself** – hostile words send alarm messages through our brains, leading to unhelpful physiological changes. Be kind to yourself.
- **Try using an app to help you** – such as CBT Thought Diary or WorryTree.

8. Circle of control

Our brains hate uncertainty – and worriers find it particularly difficult. Finding elements we can control in our lives can help. You can't control outcomes but you can control processes, habits and behaviours.

For example, if you are alarmed by climate change (out of your control), your personal actions (within your control) can make a difference: recycling more; using less plastic; cycling rather than driving; joining local environmental groups; signing online petitions; donating to tree-planting charities; voting for parties that have policies to address the issue and more.

Use the diagram opposite to identify what you can control, for example:

Outside my control

Alarming headlines

Someone else's behaviour

Within my control

Reading a trusted news source just once a day

My own behaviour; setting healthy boundaries; clear communication; self-care



In times of high-level sustained uncertainty, 'certainty anchors' can help. Jonathan Fields, author and host of the Good Life Project podcast, describes these as "a practice or process that adds something known and reliable to your life". They can be daily rituals and routines – creating grounded, peaceful moments in your day. Plan your days and weeks to include these anchors.

Write down your own concerns and what you can control

Outside my control

What concerns me but I cannot control

Within my control

What I can control

9. Change the channel

Sometimes it can seem like we have a non-stop internal radio tuned in the 'worry channel'.

Chronic worriers often have prolonged bouts of worrying and rumination – when you notice this is happening, it's time to change the channel. There's no need to try to turn off the worry channel or to attempt to get rid of it.

Imagine your mind as having rooms with different radio channels playing in each one: you could get absorbed in the commentary in one room – or decide to move into a different room to see what's playing there.

Finding another better-feeling (neutral or positive) channel will also help to lift your mood. You can 're-tune' your mental radio by consciously giving your mind something else to do. Find some healthy and absorbing distractions: action is often an effective antidote to anxiety.

Some suggestions are listed right; you can find many more ideas via the internet. Most of these activities are available to do online too.

**The greatest weapon
against stress is our
ability to choose one
thought over another.**

William James

10 ways to change the channel

- 1. Watch something entertaining:** comedy, inspiring films, online theatre or music performances, and more
- 2. Try creative and practical pursuits:** craft, online drawing classes, gardening, cook new recipes, baking, write a poem or learn to knit
- 3. Listen to podcasts** (listening to conversations can counter loneliness too) or lose yourself in an engrossing book/audiobook
- 4. Tidy up:** physical order helps us feel a sense of mental order
- 5. Let nature help you reduce your stress:** go outside to somewhere green, or watch a nature documentary. Many studies point to the benefits of regular time outdoors for improving mental health.
- 6. Listen to your favourite music** or explore other calming sounds (eg nature sounds, chants, solfeggio music or ASMR)
- 7. Learn something new:** watch a TED Talk, documentary or online museum tour; check out online courses for new languages and skills
- 8. Increase social connection to feel better:** talk to your friends; do something with your family; join an exercise/dance class or a choir
- 9. Help someone else:** call your grandparents; volunteer with a local community group; or do a random act of kindness
- 10. Try helpful apps,** eg Calm or MyLife.

10. Meditation

Meditation helps us to learn how to live with our chattering 'monkey minds'. When we're lost in thought, we are subject to the influence of those thoughts (eg '*what if...*' thoughts can make us anxious). With practice, we can allow worrisome thoughts to just pass through, without any need to overcome or change them. Meditation helps us observe that our thoughts and feelings are just temporary events in our minds, not facts or truths. We can't control the content of our minds but, with practice, we can control the focus of our attention.

Meditation actually changes the brain, in very positive ways. Neuroscience studies show that our brain keeps changing throughout our lives in response to our life experiences (via neuroplasticity) – and meditation practices can influence how it changes. Research shows meditation affects both the function and structure of the brain, improving our mental and physical health.

There is no situation in which paying careful kind attention would not be the most helpful response.

Sylvia Boorstein

There is an alternative to simply identifying with the next thought that pops into consciousness.

Sam Harris

You don't have to control your thoughts, You just have to stop letting them control you.

Dan Millman

Some common types of meditation are:

- 1. Focused attention** – the focus is typically on the breath. Some people use a mantra (a word or sound). It helps the brain be aware of distraction.
- 2. Mindfulness** – this is also called pure awareness or open monitoring meditation. It leads to diminished activity in anxiety-related areas.
- 3. Loving-kindness** – this practice helps you be nicer towards yourself and others.

Many people also enjoy 'yoga nidra' guided meditations for deep relaxation: find them online. You could also try mindful mind-body activities like yoga and tai chi. Popular meditation apps include **Headspace**, **Insight Timer** and **Ten Percent Happier**.

Your personal wellbeing reminder

Going up – What helps

List 8 things / people / places / events / activities that help you maintain okayness

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8

Going down – Triggers for overwhelm

List 8 things / people / places / events / activities / unhelpful thinking patterns that make your worry habit worse

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8

Resources

EFT

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) uses the tapping of a series of specific accupressure points to disengage the stress response from a memory. It helps with unfinished emotional issues from the past and has been used successfully to reduce PTSD symptoms in war veterans. It can also be helpful for anxiety and other worry issues. You can find more information at www.eftuniverse.com and at www.thetappingsolution.com

Organisations

Mental Health Foundation – www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Mind – www.mind.org.uk

NHS Every Mind Matters – www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters

Grief.com

Apps

Headspace – meditation, mindful breathing and sleep

Calm – sleep, meditation and relaxation

Insight Timer – popular free meditation app

Self-Help Anxiety Management (SAM) – help for anxiety

CBT Thought Diary – thought record, mood and gratitude journal

Breathe2Relax – breathing exercises for anxiety and stress

MindShift CBT – with tools, thought journal and more

WorryTree – record, manage and problem-solve worries

MyLife (formerly called Stop, Breathe, Think) – for calm, sleep and less stress

Sleepio – for better sleep



A little bit more about me...

From my own experience, I know how hard it can be to live with a worry habit. And I've always been curious about it. Why do we worry so much? Why do we have negative self-talk? How can we make positive changes? How do we build resilience to cope with life's uncertainties?

Over the years, I've discovered how to live a happy and less anxious life – and I support others who want that too. I've been coaching since my training in 2007, supporting individuals and also running small-group workshops on 'breaking the worry habit'.

If you'd like to live with less worry and more inner calm, let me help you.

Sophie

sophie@sophiewilliamscoaching.com



**Sophie Williams
Coaching**

Less worry. More calm.