

Take The No-Worry Challenge

By Anne E. Collier

Have you ever worried about something? You think about *it* - or more accurately, you fixate on *it*. You catastrophize the disaster that will befall you if *it* does or doesn't happen. Then you strategize. You spend your "free time" on it. Thoughts of *it* creep into your not-so free time. You aren't sleeping well, and you aren't getting much done. Sound familiar?

It might sound trite to say that *it* is all in your head, but *it* is. Whether you are thinking clearly and objectively or obsessed with impending doom depends on your outlook. How you think, most importantly, is a choice. Intellectually, most of us know this. We can agree that "It's not the problem, but how you deal with it." And yet, when confronted with a situation that tests our mettle, beyond logic and reason we experience that disaster is imminent. We don't even see that the situation presents us with a choice, and instead let our fears drive our thinking.

It is obvious that the best choice is not to worry. Worries and fear-driven thinking reduce our cognitive function, impeding our ability to engage in the abstract thinking necessary to succeed. However, eschewing worry is arduous and counterintuitive. Our instincts, honed over the last 6 million years, direct us to stay highly attuned to threats so that we can strategize our survival. Thus, *worrying*, which is fear-triggered strategizing, is imprinted on us as necessary to survive. Worrying does not, however, produce the best solutions. The notion that it does, is specious at best and dangerous at worst. The choice to "not worry" allows us to harness the highest level of problem-solving cognition. It is a choice to go fast by going slow because it is by slowing things down that we are able think, understand, and solve at our best.

14 Strategies for Winning the No-Worry Challenge

Not quite convinced? Or maybe you are, but not sure how to live the "no-worry" choice? Try these fourteen strategies.

1. Objectively evaluate your own thinking. Sensing your own thinking - that is, ascertaining whether you are obsessively worrying - is essential to staying out of the worry zone. Identify your signs that you are worrying so that you can remind yourself that you have a choice.
2. Distinguish between annoyance and disaster. There's no question that unexpected events can throw us off our game. When this happens, remember to pause to consider whether the disturbance is merely an annoyance requiring a change in course or the disaster that your ancient brain fights to avoid.
3. Differentiate between a true time crunch and a brain crunch. When we're stressed, unfocused and overwhelmed, we think we don't have enough time. What seems like a time crunch, is a brain crunch - overwhelm coupled with a sense imminent doom. It occurs when we fail to assess priorities and develop a plan to achieve our goals. It is the absence of a plan that triggers the crunch.
4. Optimally orient your time. While stated often, it cannot be overstated: Be present. You are most effective when you are living primarily in the present moment. This doesn't mean sitting in a knee-busting cross-legged pose with your eyes closed and

hands in prayer. Being present means that you are focused and engaged in what you are doing now, whether it be work, a sport, or enjoying friends and family.

5. Do what you can do. In every situation, there are the things you can control and those you can't. Focus on what you can do and not on what you can't.
6. Go from anxiety to action. When you find yourself in a sea of worry, start swimming slowly. Don't flail and drown. Focus on solving the problem, or doing something productive even if it's just making a batch of chocolate chip cookies. Action restores your sense of personal efficacy.
7. Recognize when it's better not to do anything. It can be more effective to leave a problem alone because either you need time to reflect or others need to do their part. Immediate action isn't always the answer.
8. Offload what's distracting you. If it's on your mind, distracting you from being present, it's time to make yourself a note and get back to it later.
9. Time box your commitments. When overwhelmed by work or personal commitments, determine what you will do by when so you can focus on the most urgent task. Compartmentalize so that you are focused on action now. Don't worry about the future.
10. Stay in your groove, avoid being in a rut. Routines are essential because they reduce the number of choices we need to make every day, thus freeing up our brains to focus where we need to focus. That said, if every day feels like Groundhog Day, mix it up. Take a different run, walk, or commute, for example.
11. Trust yourself and your team. Trust yourself and your team. If you don't trust a team member, use this fact as a management tool¹ and fix the distrust.
12. Manage expectations to take the pressure off. If you are reading this article, you are someone who holds yourself to very high standards. I know this because you worry, and you are looking for a way out to reduce the impact of worrying on your wellbeing without letting others down. Thus, whether it's a work or personal matter, communicate *before* an expectation can't be met. You'll find that getting ahead of another's potential disappointment relieves the worry by removing doubt about the other person's reaction. And, the reaction is probably not as bad as you think. Either way, by confronting the potential disappointment you free your mind so that you can do what you said you would.
13. Seek support. If life isn't feeling like sunshine and lollipops at the moment, seek support from friends and family. Be around people who remind you that life is actually pretty good by boosting your mood, being kind, and caring about your wellbeing.
14. Be grateful, kind and caring. This is not advice to "be a better person" but rather to focus on what's important. Being grateful is a healthy reframing. Kindness and caring gets you out of worry and focused on others.

The No-Worry Challenge doesn't have to be an "until-death-do-you-part" commitment. Rather, it is an opportunity for you to try living differently for one month. After a month, if you prefer the freedom that comes from choosing to live in a reduced state of worry, take the No-Worry Challenge every day!

¹ See Collier, A.E. *Trust As a Management Tool*.