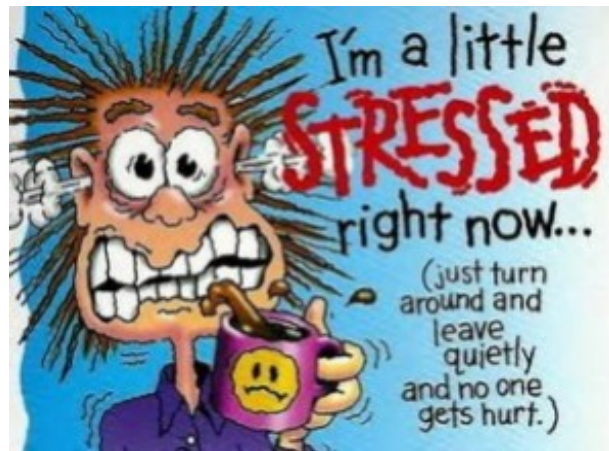


Surrounded by Worry

by Ed Rowell



Do you ever worry? No, I mean really worry — to the point of losing sleep or developing an ulcer, a headache, or high blood pressure? The word worry comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word meaning "to choke" or "to strangle." That's an apt description of what worry does to us.

And it not only has physical consequences, it has spiritual ones as well. In the end, worry won't stretch our savings account or keep cancer or job loss at bay. But it will sour our mood and eventually stifle our relationship with God. Giving up the debilitating influence of worry is one big step toward a life well-lived.

Worry Types

Worry is primarily based on fear and uncertainty. It's the anxiety caused when we think we might lose something important to us. Sometimes it's obvious: You're worried about losing your job; you're worried about losing a relationship; you're worried you're losing your mind. At other times, the potential loss is a little trickier to identify: You're afraid because you're losing the ability to control a situation; you're anxious about the future; you're afraid of losing a dream.

Though the roots of worrying are the same, worriers come in many shapes and sizes. Some are casual worriers to whom worrying is more of a hobby. Others have become full-time professionals at this deadly game. See if you qualify for any of these:

Mayday worriers. Life is full of risks, and weighing risks is an important part of decision-making. But scaring ourselves by dwelling on remote or unlikely risks and anticipating the worst-case scenario in every situation is a surefire prescription for sleepless nights and anxious days. Mayday worriers continually live as if their plane is going down and no one is responding on the radio.

Yesterday worriers. These are the people who can't get past their mistakes of the past. They

suffer from the "shoulda-coulda-woulda" syndrome — "I shoulda known that would happen." "I coulda prepared for that better." "I woulda pursued that other lead."

The events of yesterday can give us the wisdom to make better choices today, but none of us possess the power to take back a careless word, undo a careless act, or unthink a hurtful thought. Yesterday worrying is perhaps the most futile category.

Someday worriers. Speculation about what might happen is futile. Tomorrow belongs to God. It's completely His, with all its possibilities, burdens, perils, promise, and potential. It may be ours in time, but for right now, it's His. Therefore, there's no need for us to worry about what's not even ours yet.

Everyday worriers. Some people get trapped in a cycle of worry, replaying the same scenario over and over. They lie awake all night and literally worry themselves sick. For these people, worry has moved from a hobby to a full-time occupation.

Drop the Worry Habit : Creative Anxiety

To worry about things we can't change is a terrible waste of emotional energy. Rather than worry, people who go the distance have learned the art of "creative anxiety." While worry is destructive, creative anxiety is constructive. Worry focuses on the problem; creative anxiety focuses on the solution. Worry controls us; creative anxiety puts us in control of our emotions.

Here are some ways to drop the worry habit and learn new patterns of thinking:

1. **Schedule creative anxiety.** Worry creates a false sense of urgency. We find freedom from worry, then, by identifying that false urgency and making plans to consider options and solutions. It's helpful to set personal parameters, such as: "I won't worry about work on personal time." "I won't worry about family when I'm working." "I won't worry about unlikely possibilities until they become probable." Follow those parameters and keep worry in its proper place — and its proper perspective.
2. **Think the concern through, then set it aside.** Regardless of your profession, you have parts of your work that can't be completed in one block of time. For instance, a business proposal is the result of research, many meetings, consultations, and revisions. In the same way, acknowledging that you may not solve life's great problems in one sitting can be a liberating thought. Work it through. Keep track of notes and doodles and possible solutions. Then, you can park your anxiety with those notes until you come back.
3. **Imagine positive possibilities.** Creative thinking means postponing judgment on an idea for another day. Instead of saying it won't work, consider all solutions as possibilities, regardless of how far-fetched they may seem. Part of what makes creative anxiety work is the willingness to look for less-than-obvious solutions.
4. **Give yourself permission to be less than perfect.** All of our worries are rooted in fear of loss. What many of us fear is losing our inaccurate self-portrait of having it all

together. Perfectionists would rather postpone something than see it done less than perfectly. This habitual postponement causes great anxiety and leads to worrisome habits.

- 5. Practice the discipline of submission.** Part of our old nature is our desire to control. We want to control our circumstances, our relationships, and our future. People with a high need to control are often labeled "control freaks" by those around them. These people are prime candidates for worry-rooted disorders because so much of life is beyond control. When something like cancer, downsizing, or a lawsuit occurs, those who need to control go into a tailspin.

Control is at the heart of one of the most significant passages in all the New Testament. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:5-7).

Servants are never in control. They are by nature submitted to their master. Jesus gave up control — of the entire universe — so He might please His Father and redeem humankind. He never once doubted God's provision. It's our doubt that God will provide that keeps us from releasing control. When we fully understand our relationship to God and assume the role of servant, we leave behind the need to control and the worry that tags along with that need.

Telling yourself not to worry is easy; walking it out is much more difficult. But Jesus' example proves life doesn't have to grip us with anxiety. We can refuse to be surrounded by fear and live a worry-free life.

Jesus and Worry

Jesus offered help for worriers by reminding us of three important truths in Matthew 6:25-34:

We are of infinite worth to God. Here we identify what is perhaps our greatest stumbling block. At one time or another, many have heard from a parent, sibling, teacher, employer, or spouse the messages such as: "Can't you do anything right?" "Why can't you be more like..." "What's wrong with you anyway?" or "I've found someone else" This erodes our sense of value.

All creation is of great value to God. His provision for even the smallest of His creations — birds and flowers — gives us assurance that He will not neglect those who have been made in His image. The one who knows us best will, in all things, guide us toward His preferable future for our lives.

Worry is futile. Jesus offers a simple test: Can worry add a single hour to your life? No. In fact, worry will most likely subtract hours from it instead. Worry has no productive value. Worry is an indicator of our level of faith and trust in God. Whenever we choose to worry about something, we are in effect saying, "I'm not sure God will do anything about my situation."

Once we identify worry as a lack of trust, then we can turn it over to God. Trust for faith is the

essential ingredient in an authentic relationship with Jesus. Putting our future in His hands — all of our future — is the mark of a Christian.

True wealth can't be held in our hands. A close look at our checkbook and our calendar can reveal our true priorities. While our concern is almost always for the things of this world, our Father's greatest desire is to give us Kingdom wealth. When we refocus our vision of wealth, we realize the extent to which God provides for us, both in this life and in the life to come. Those things that are of ultimate value — our salvation and the lives we influence for God's kingdom — can't be lost. These are the things thieves can't steal and moths can't destroy.

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