



FAMILY *Matters*

Why do I worry so much?

Michael D. Zito, Ph.D.



Most people worry from time to time. However, when the worrying is excessive it can cause unnecessary stress. Indicators of excessive worrying could include finding it difficult to relax and/or sleep at night, and feeling consumed by your negative “what ifs.” Worries are repetitive negative thoughts about the future that usually produces anxiety. Those who worry often believe that worrying has the power to prevent something bad from happening and at the same time prepare them for the worst. Therefore, some worriers believe that the more you worry the better the outcome will be. Unfortunately, worrying creates a false “magical” sense of control and in most cases is non-productive. Worrying is often associated with a strong sense of guilt, meaning that if something bad happens and you didn’t worry about it, you will feel extremely guilty. It is important to realize that worrying is simply a mental activity that does not influence whether something bad happens or not. It is better to engage in productive worrying, meaning worrying about important things and make a plan of action to address your worry. If a parent is worried about their child’s school performance, make a plan to get involved or hire a tutor. Worry without a plan of action is non-productive and can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of frustration and distress for the worrier.

Worriers pessimistically overestimate the likelihood of negative events because they more easily recall negative dramatic events they have heard about than positive ones. They confuse possibility with the probability that something might happen. Worriers will often rationalize their worry by saying “it could happen.” This “could happen” belief fails to take into account the low probability of many events that people worry about. For example, should you worry about the possibility that a small plane could crash into your house? It “could happen” but there is an extremely small chance it will, so most people don’t think about it. There is evidence to suggest that 85% of what people worry about never occurs. Then why waste your time worrying? However, worriers often believe that they need to worry because if something happens to a loved one, they will feel responsible and guilty for not having prevented it. Worriers live in fear of their own emotional reactions to negative events because strong emotions are perceived to be intolerable. Most worriers suffer from an inflated sense of responsibility and need to realize what they can and can’t realistically control.

Worriers often catastrophize mistakes and expect perfection in themselves. They often have difficulty handling uncertainty and assume the worst in uncertain situations.

They confuse negative predictions about the future with facts and need to realize a negative thought is only a thought and not a reality. Said another way, worriers confuse negative prediction with reality but struggle to realize the predicted events rarely happen. Worriers often believe they can’t control their worries but in my experience they often learn to manage their worries through cognitive behavioral therapy.

So what can a worrier do?

- Reality check your worries, i.e., consider the likelihood of an event before worrying about it
- Make an action plan rather than worrying
- Realize worrying does not “magically” prevent anything
- Worry about important things you can control and make a plan
- Take charge of your worries by learning how to redirect your thoughts to neutral or positive ones
- Keep a worry log and track how often your worries did not come true
- Realize worrying is only a negative prediction about an imagined event that in most case does not come true
- Develop a more optimistic view by looking for the positive and seeing life experiences as learning opportunities.

Michael D. Zito, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist with offices in Warren and Morristown. He practices clinical and sport psychology with children through adults and can be reached at MichaelZitoPhD@yahoo.com Dr. Zito welcomes your questions and ideas for future articles.