

“Worry: Our Favorite Thing That No One Likes to Do”

By Gary Alger, M.Div., LADC, CEAP, Solutions EAP Consultant

Here is just a partial list of some of the things about which we worry. How does it compare with your daily list?

What to cook, what to wear, keeping up with bills, mortgage, groceries, body fat index, fitting in, the neighborhood, taxes, wetlands conservation, political corruption, school budgets, traffic, stock market, weight gain, success, retirement, natural resources, global warming, racism, dust bunnies, gossip, human rights violations, personal comfort and well-being, finances, gas prices, avian bird flu pandemic, a.i.d.s., hepatitis b, summer colds, cancer, pimples, injustice, war, job satisfaction, security, productivity, promotion, bonus, seniority, the future, the past, kids' health, safety, marriage/relationship, date night, rust, aging parents, house plants, bathtub ring, crabgrass, litter, landfills, fleas, social security, consumer rights, holiday shopping, identity theft, true health and happiness, homework, insurance rates, faith questions, health questions, fall leaves, global issues, toxic mold, toxic anger, life and death, debt, sibling rivalry, the oceans, ozone, family, job, separating lights and colors, keeping it all together!



There is simply no way to eliminate worry entirely from our lives. Mild anxiety within acceptable limits actually serves us well sometimes by keeping us alert and on the lookout for potential “threats” on the horizon. No one likes to be surprised by unexpected circumstances, especially avoidable ones, that inevitably throw us off course. Paying attention to what may happen, and taking steps to avoid problems, helps to minimize risk. But too often worry gets out of control, taking on a life of its own, sometimes seemingly building up beyond our power to keep it in check. Worry running rampant over our lives takes precious time and energy away from us, and is now known to contribute to so many of today’s common health problems, from high blood pressure to cancer.

The truth is that, while for some people worrying, or anxiety, can be a chronic psychiatric condition requiring treatment with medication and psychotherapy, fortunately for most of us that is simply not the case. Quite often what feels like chronic, crazy-making anxiety is actually little more than a series of self-perpetuating, counterproductive thinking traps into which many people fall. These cognitive “bad habits”, with a little effort aimed at re-thinking things in different ways, can easily be reigned back to manageable levels and actually become positive tools, regardless of how far they seem to have taken over life.

This month we will look at a few simple, basic steps to help regain a measure of control over the natural thinking process that considers upcoming issues and challenges of our daily lives and sorts them into either manageable parts, or uncontrollable waves of apparently out-of-control chaos. Stay tuned!



“Antidotes for Worrying: Acceptance”

Most worrying begins as anxious anticipation of an event or circumstance that we sense may somehow threaten or hurt us. The event itself is actually no more than a

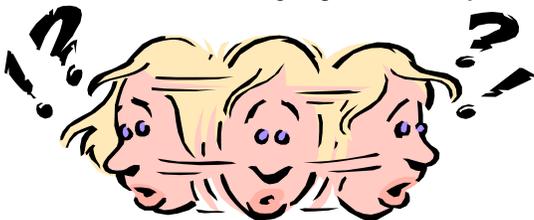
neutral occurrence in the universe - something that either will or will not happen. Once we attach our perceptions and expectations about the event, however, we apply an energy 'charge' to it, often negative, thus declaring it to be a threat worthy of our ruminating and foreboding. One way to minimize the volume and severity of worrying in our lives is to monitor and change our perceptions about the level of threat that any given situation may represent for us. The truth is that, while some things are worth worrying about, many things simply are not.

By lightly tapping our memory banks, most of us can easily recall signature sayings and other wisdom from the significant people who shaped our lives. My dad, one of the more peaceful people I have known, relied frequently on one such saying as he and my mom molded the characters of their four sons. As if reinforcing in his own mind the truth that helped him cope with his world, whenever the sky clouded up he would ask, "Boys, do you know what we're going to do if it rains? We're going to let it rain."

For years I cringed at the silly riddle that became so annoying in its familiarity. Only as an adult, and a parent myself, did I begin to see the simple peacefulness its wisdom must have provided for him as he gracefully managed frustration at work, the ups and downs of parenting and ultimately his passing through terminal cancer. The life practice of granting permission for Mother Nature to rain when she wanted to, and for all things beyond his control to be as they were, freed my dad of mounds of frustration and resentment in his life. It also allowed him to channel precious energy toward plans B and C, or other matters actually within his power to control.

I believe that an essential key to such freedom is **acceptance**. The notion of acceptance is a stumbling block for many of us, because we tend to associate it with approval when we face unsettling or troubling situations in life. Accepting the possibility, or reality, of rain on your parade, cancer in your body, or unemployment in your future has nothing to do with approval. Rather, it is simply the practice of granting permission for things or people beyond your control to be as they are, allowing you to focus instead on things within your control. This practice empowers all of us to more accurately interpret the level of personal threat that each life circumstance represents to us, dismissing many potential worry warts as simply the way life goes sometimes. The wisdom of Alcoholics Anonymous, and its many offshoots, understands this practice as "living life on life's terms." I am convinced that it is an easier way to go about things. With fewer worries day to day we are freed up to use our precious energy on any number of more deserving priorities.

"Antidotes for Worrying: Two Simple Questions"



As I mentioned last week, most worrying begins as anxious anticipation of an event or circumstance that you sense may somehow threaten or hurt you. The unique quality and extent of the "threat", as only you can perceive it, largely determines how much anxious energy it will generate in you (a.k.a. how much you will worry about that particular issue!)

An effective strategy for monitoring and minimizing the amount of anxious energy you expend over a given situation is to ask and answer two simple, yet profound, questions that essentially analyze the potential threat which that situation poses for you at that moment. Answering these two self inventory questions characterizes any life stressor as falling within one of four basic arenas which, if allowed to, will provide you with a clear response to help you cope with the situation at hand.

1. *"How important is this situation to me - right now?"*
2. *"How much power/control do I have over this situation - right now?"*

If the issue facing you is, in fact, *important*, but *beyond* your power (Arena I) then surviving and managing that issue requires you to work toward **ACCEPTANCE** of it (a.k.a. granting permission for things beyond you

to be as they are, so that you may focus on things within your control.) An example of this response was my dad's decision to allow his body to be riddled with terminal cancer, and focus on planning that trip to Alaska, even while following prescribed chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

If the issue is *important*, and *within* your power (Arena II) then the task before you is to TAKE ACTION (a.k.a. don't just sit there, do something!) If my child is struggling in school, but no one there seems to be concerned, it is my job to call and request a conference with the teacher(s) and work toward a solution.

If you determine that the issue is *unimportant*, but *within* your power (Arena III) you may decide to tackle it, but you are wise to first pause and WEIGH YOUR OPTIONS to see if such action is worth the effort, given its relative insignificance. If your teen has a peer-driven aversion to jackets as the weather turns colder, what stands to suffer most? Her/his comfort at the bus stop? Your relationship? Or, your perceived image as a parent in the eyes of the neighbors? You decide, and act accordingly.

Finally, if you look at an issue and decide that it is both *unimportant*, and *beyond* your power to change (Arena IV) then your job is to REMOVE THE NON-ISSUE from your radar screen and let it go. How much less worry would you have in your life if you simply dismissed all that foolishness from obnoxious drivers, negative co-workers and other such minutia from your precious attention span? The answer may be enlightening!

"Antidotes for Worrying: Re-ordering Self Talk"



Everyone knows that we all talk to ourselves. More importantly, as you may have read in earlier E-tips, throughout our waking hours we all have an ongoing inner dialogue with ourselves - one that goes largely unattended. While the actual power of our own subtle persuasiveness is largely lost on most of us, hardly anyone escapes from the influence that our self talk messages have over how we feel and what we say and do to others.

In my work with people every day I am beginning to notice a pattern in the way worried folks tend to talk to themselves which, while being rather self-defeating, may be little more than a bad habit that is quite easy to change. We all know that even our best intended compliments to loved ones, friends and co-workers lose their significance as soon as we insert the word "but" as a segue to a critical or negative remark. In the same way when we think about a challenging or difficult situation facing us, we often give away our best chance of balancing the negative aspects with anything positive just by the way we think about it. If it is true that the value of any words preceding "yes, but..." are lost or diminished, then way too often, it seems, we lose the rational, more positive truth by focusing on the negatives. Consider the following statement, which could easily be extracted from the inner dialogue operating for many people.

"OK, in my head I know that statistically air travel is much safer than even automobiles, and most likely my flight will be just fine, BUT STILL, I'm so scared that the pilot might fall asleep or be on drugs or something like that!"

The emphasis in the first self talk message is all about the emotionally based, fear driven "what if?" question. Its greatest weight and power, upon which one bases an emotional reaction, is pure conjecture, pessimistic and basically irrational. No wonder the individual involved is likely to be anxious and panicky.

Compare that to a similar message that, while using the same thoughts, simply reverses their order, thereby shifting the emphasis and greater meaning.

"I'm so scared that the pilot might fall asleep, or be on drugs, or something like that. BUT...in my head I know that statistically air travel is much safer than even automobiles, and most likely my flight will be just fine."

Without rejecting or fighting with the strong fear based thought, the anxious person is left with a more rational, fact based truth upon which to create and sustain a more manageable feeling of safety and relative calm.

“Antidotes to Worry” (summary)



There is simply no way to eliminate worry entirely from our lives. Mild anxiety actually serves us well sometimes by keeping us alert to spot potential “threats” on the horizon. But too often worry gets out of control, sometimes seemingly building up beyond our power to keep it in check. Worry running rampant over our lives takes precious time and energy away from us, and is now known to contribute to so many of today’s common health problems, from high blood pressure to cancer. Here are a few simple ideas to change the way we respond to events or circumstances in life in order to gain some additional perspective and spend less energy worrying about them.

ACCEPTANCE

As if reinforcing in his own mind a philosophy that helped him cope with his world, whenever the sky clouded up my dad would ask, “Boys, do you know what we’re going to do if it rains? We’re going to let it rain.” Although for years I cringed at the silly riddle, as an adult and parent myself, I began to see the simple peacefulness its wisdom must have provided for him as he gracefully managed frustrations at work, the ups and downs of parenting and ultimately his passing through terminal cancer. The life practice of granting permission for Mother Nature to rain when she wanted to, and for all things beyond his control to be as they were, freed my dad of mounds of frustration and resentment in his life. It also allowed him to channel precious energy toward plans B and C, or other matters actually within his power to control.

The key to such freedom is acceptance, a stumbling block for many of us, if we tend to associate it with approval when facing difficult situations in life. Accepting rain on your parade, cancer in your body, or unemployment in your future has nothing to do with approval. Rather, it is simply the practice of granting permission for things or people beyond your control to be as they are, allowing you to focus instead on things within your control

SELF INVENTORY QUESTIONS

Another effective strategy for minimizing worry is to ask and answer two simple questions that essentially analyze the potential threat which that situation poses for you at that moment. Your answers characterize any life stressor into one of four basic arenas which, if allowed to, will provide you with a clear response to help you cope with the situation at hand.

1. *“How important is this situation to me - right now?”*
2. *“How much power/control do I have over this situation - right now?”*

If the issue facing you is, in fact, *important*, but *beyond* your power, then surviving and managing that issue requires you to work toward ACCEPTANCE of it (see above).

If the issue is *important*, and *within* your power, then the task before you is to TAKE ACTION (In other words, don’t just sit there, do something!).

If you determine that the issue is *unimportant*, but *within* your power you may decide to tackle it, but you are wise to first pause and WEIGH YOUR OPTIONS to see if such action is worth the effort, given its relative insignificance.

Finally, if you look at an issue and decide that it is both *unimportant*, and *beyond* your power to change, then your job is to REMOVE THE NON-ISSUE from your radar screen and let it go.

RE-ORDERING SELF TALK

Way too often, it seems, we give away our best chance of balancing the negative aspects of a situation with anything positive just by the way we think about it. There is a common pattern in the way many worried folks talk to themselves which, while being rather self-defeating, may be little more than a bad habit that is quite easy to change. If it is true that the value of any words preceding the phrase “yes, but...” are lost or diminished, then consider the following statement, which could easily be extracted from the inner dialogue operating for many people.

“OK, in my head I know that statistically air travel is much safer than even automobiles, and most likely my flight will be just fine, BUT, I’m so scared that the pilot might fall asleep or be on drugs or something like that!”

The emphasis in the first self talk message is all about the emotionally based, fear driven “what if?” question. Its greatest weight and power, upon which one bases an emotional reaction, comes from pure conjecture, is rather pessimistic and basically irrational. No wonder the individual involved is likely to be anxious and panicky!

Compare that to a similar message that, while using the same thoughts, simply reverses their order, thereby shifting the emphasis and greater meaning.

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Without rejecting or fighting with the strong fear based thought, the anxious person is left with a more rational, fact based truth upon which to create and sustain a more manageable feeling of safety and relative calm.

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