



Clear Thinking Issue 121

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4 wonderful ways to wipe away worries

How to help clients who worry too much – by Mark Tyrrell

“Drag your thoughts away from your troubles... by the ears, by the heels, or any other way you can manage it!” (Mark Twain)

‘Worrying’ is a word that comes from an old English expression meaning to ‘strangle’. (1) That’s an appropriate connotation, because worries can certainly strangle the life out of you.

Persistent, chronic worrying can turn into a uncomfortable habit that’s hard to get shot of, like an old pair of shoes that have become cracked or misshapen, so that wearing them is actually harmful, but you’ve worn them for so long it’s hard to bring yourself to get rid of them.

Chronic worriers even worry when they have nothing to worry about! Some feel that if they *don’t* worry then they are ‘tempting fate’. One guy I worked with felt that it was his worrying (rather than, say, jet propulsion) that kept the plane in flight whenever he flew. “I feel like if I *don’t* worry, something bad will happen!”

Worrying is not harmless. It has consequences. The more we worry, the more stress hormone we produce and the more we dream at night. In turn, over-dreaming caused by unresolved worry can cause clinical depression (2) (something else to worry about!), so helping your clients worry less can have multiple benefits.

The role of the imagination

Chronic worrying (which most of us will fall into to some extent at times) has been called a 'thought disorder' but it's more a misuse of the imagination. 'Imagination disorder' may not sound quite so clinical, but is possibly more accurate. Imagination is not just 'all in your head'. It has measurable, palpable *effects*, physical and behavioural.

Chronic jealousy, for example, is a classic misuse of the imagination. Jealous people, often with no real grounds, may imagine all sorts of negative things about their partner's actions and intentions. This can significantly raise their blood pressure (evidence of the hypnotic power of the imagination to affect the body) and may even lead them to commit terrible crimes – all because they buy into the scenario created by their imagination.

Hypnotherapy, of course, works in the same way – but to *positive* ends. We use the imagination in hypnosis to alter physical phenomena (for example, remove warts, improve immune response, take away pain) and behavioural responses (for example, help someone stop smoking).

The common denominator is the imagination, and whether a person uses it *constructively or destructively*.

So how do you get your clients who are caught up in chronic worrying to use their imaginations more productively? Here are four powerful tips.

1) Get distance on the worry

I'll often talk about how we are capable of imagining absolutely anything, but whether we *buy in* to what we imagine is another matter altogether. Stephen King uses his imagination (as do many writers) to create terrifying scenarios, but he produces all these scary ideas without being scared witless by them himself. He can clearly separate himself from what he is imagining.

Simple as it sounds, this is often a completely new idea for many worriers. As I'm typing this, I can quite vividly imagine the ceiling caving in on top of me while not believing for one second that it's going to happen (fingers crossed).

So rather than trying to get them 'not to think about it' - possibly the most useless advice ever - we can teach them to *relax deeply while imagining what normally scares them*.

In effect, we are asking them to worry without feeling worried. I have found this to be surprisingly easy and effective.

We can hypnotically get them to ‘see’ their worries in the distance ‘over there’ while feeling ever so relaxed ‘over here’. I might even prescribe set doses of ‘worrying while relaxed’ for the chronic worrier to take between sessions.

Emotion is the neon sign yelling “Pay attention to this!” and when you diminish the *emotion*, the old worrying thoughts become much less compulsive.

2) Organise the worry

There’s nothing like a timetable for bringing things under control. Worry tends to be intrusive, to gate crash your head when you’re trying to enjoy yourself or concentrate on something. Prescribing ‘worry time’ is a neat way of prescribing the symptom and *organising* this destructive use of the imagination as a prelude to getting rid of it once and for all.

(Of course, being able to worry *sometimes* is useful for all of us, so perhaps we won’t get rid of it completely – just keep it in its place.)

Asking the client to select a specific time of day to sit down and do nothing but worry for a specific period gives them permission to ‘defer worrying’.

When they a troublesome thought occurs, they are to say to themselves: “Okay – there’s a worrying thought. I’ll worry about that in my ‘worry time’, not now.”

Setting up a fixed period – no longer than 20 minutes – for worrying soon shows the client that worrying doesn’t have the hold over them that they thought. When they *must* do it for 20 minutes, it gets harder and harder to do – thus transforming itself from something that they *can’t help doing* to something that’s *a real nuisance to keep up*.

3) Write down solution steps

Worrying that doesn’t lead anywhere is like a dog chasing its tail.

It’s been shown that writing about emotional issues lowers stress hormone levels, perhaps because writing requires us to use other (less emotional) parts of the brain. But to be really effective writing needs to be more than just venting.

So get your worry clients to use this practical writing technique:

- **List** – get them to write down, exactly and clearly, just what they are fearful of, making as full a list as possible

- **Split** – mark each item on the list in such a way as to show if it is ‘soluble’ or ‘insoluble’ (for example, worries about situations that cannot be immediately changed, or concerns over the unchangeable past).
- **Steps** – copy all the ‘soluble’ items into a single column on one side of a page and note down beside each item in the next column some practical steps that can be taken towards ‘fixing’ that problem.
- **Resolve** – copy all the ‘insoluble’ items into a single column on one side of another page. Beside each item describe how they would need to *feel differently* about these issues in order to resolve these worries psychologically (for example, “I need to accept that he’s gone and won’t come back”).

4) Chuck your worries away

Writing down bad memories, enclosing the paper in an envelope, sealing the envelope and then throwing it away has been found to influence the memory, in the sense that recollection of the emotional details of an event becomes weaker after this metaphorical act. (3)

I once had a client who told me she was worried about certain things she felt she couldn’t talk to me about. I asked her whether she could write them down so we could “dispose of them properly”. She did so. I then asked her to take the sealed envelope and put it through my paper shredder.

We then talked about those things she *did* feel able to discuss with me. In a later session, she confided that since doing our ‘ritual’ she somehow felt much less concerned about those secret worries.

Ultimately, worry should be a tool or a signal that lets us know when something might need addressing. We don’t want to lose this tool completely, but no tool should ever be allowed to enslave its owner.

Related: [How to stop your client’s vicious circle of worry](#)

Notes

(1) Hunting dogs would ‘worry’ their prey to death – that is, they would grab them by the throat.

(2) See Joseph Griffin’s interview ‘[The Dream Catcher](#)’ in *The New Scientist* 2003:

(3) Xiuping Li at NUS Business School asked 80 students to write about a recent decision they regretted. Half of them were told to seal their written recollection in an envelope. Afterwards, the envelope students felt less negative about the event than control students who just handed in their recollection without an envelope. The finding was replicated with forty female students who were asked to write about a strong personal desire that hadn't been satisfied. 'Grab it, bag it, bin it – a new approach to psychological problem solving', *British Psychological Society Research Digest*, 6 September 2010.

Precision Hypnosis online training course

Chronic worriers hypnotise themselves without realising it. They focus intently on the worrying idea, fail to notice all the other considerations, lose track of time and become completely caught up in the disaster scenarios they dream up in their heads.

If only they knew how to use this amazing skill in a positive way!

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See you in a fortnight.

Mark Tyrrell
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Uncommon Knowledge
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