

WORRIED SICK - AND SICK OF WORRYING?

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April 2012

Recently I've worked with several patients who have a problem with worry - it's keeping them awake at night, or interfering with their productivity at work, or preventing them from doing the things they need and want to be doing to get on with life and feel better.

Worry is one of the most common human emotions. It is based in the survival instinct, and under normal circumstances, serves a protective function, helping us to anticipate and avoid danger. In fact, the absence of worry may signal a serious problem, called denial!

But worry is also central in behavioral problems like procrastination and perfectionism, and is a core component of many psychological conditions, including depression, panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, attention deficit disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Why do we worry? Worry is a manifestation of fear. And neuroscience has revealed that our brains are equipped to register fear, and worry, more acutely than any other emotion. As Rick Hanson, neuropsychologist and author, says, "*Our minds are like Velcro to the negative, and Teflon to the positive.*" (check out Rick's writings at www.wisebrain.org)

When worry becomes excessive, it ceases to serve as the useful built-in alarm system nature intended, and becomes instead a painful problem in itself - like a car alarm system that goes off with the slightest vibration and can't shut itself off. And it seems to take on a life of its own, taking over the mind of the worrier to the exclusion of everything else.

One of my patients was told by her physical therapist that there was "something really wrong" with her knee, six months post-surgery, and that until she could get to the doctor, she should stop doing the exercises she'd been doing faithfully each day. This young woman didn't understand why she suddenly seemed to lose the ability to think clearly, and began to fear she was losing her mind; but I explained that the PT's message had sent a signal to her brain "DANGER!", confirming her worst fears, while at the same time taking away the activity which had given her some sense of control over her situation. This is exactly what noted psychiatrist Dr. Edward Hallowell, in his 1998 book on worry, describes as "*the basic equation of worry: a heightened sense of vulnerability in the presence of a diminished sense of power.*" (read more at www.drhallowell.com/books/worry)

Hallowell explains that like high blood pressure, excessive worry can make you physically sick, in fact it can even kill you. What's news to many people is that worry, just like blood pressure, can be regulated. While there are medications that can relieve worry to an extent, and changes in diet and exercise often help, the most effective treatment is Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which teaches people to change how they feel by changing their thoughts and behaviors. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is a newer variation of CBT which incorporates meditation and yoga practices. For more information on these and other treatments for worriers, contact me at: