Worrying as an Unhelpful Coping Mechanism and how to Monitor it

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Have you ever noticed how much we worry over things on a daily basis? We live in a difficult era, we face challenges every day, there is uncertainty about pretty much everything: health, economics, politics, peace, unemployment, social problems, family problems, personal problems and the list continues, depending on every person’s needs, expectations, life events and current life situation and demands.

Life goes by on a high speed. It is essential we learn how to adapt to the new data that emerge every day to get along. Sometimes, we get caught up between troubling situations, worries, requirements, “must” and “to do” lists. We have so many responsibilities to handle in order to build the life we want, that frequently, we forget to actually live the life we have.

From the minute we open our eyes, our brain is being attacked by disturbing, worrisome thoughts. We start thinking of all the things we have to do during our day, making hypotheses for all the possible things that could go wrong and mess with our schedule and tasks, while debating on how we would try to deal with all those things as best as we can, in case the worries marching through our head, came true.

The thing is, that while we use worrying as a strategy for possible threatening situations, we feed our worries, reproducing them on an endless cycle in our minds, and we end up to magnify them. When we worry, we tend to focus on the negative cues around us, selectively paying attention only to the negative aspects of the situation, as we search the environment for possible threats and obstacles. We neglect cues that suggest the opposite and we disregard the cognitive resources and capabilities we possess and could come in handy to help us through difficulties. We also tend to avoid situations we perceive as problematic and complicated, if that is an option, and we fail to enjoy what is actually happening in the present moment, under the fear of “what might happen” in the future and “what we would do about it”. We live for later, although all we have is today. Now.

Worrying is not actually capable of controlling or changing anything that could happen. Although the things we tend to worry about are possible, usually, they are not probable. That is the difference between productive and unproductive worrying. When worrying is productive, it is focused on events that have a realistic probability to happen. Unproductive worrying focuses on events that do not have a high probability of happening. Such, unproductive worries could be stated in a “what if...?” way.

Statistics support that 90% of the things we worry about do not actually happen. Because life is so stressing and we often find ourselves drowning in anxiety, we believe that worrying is as a form of coping with those perceived, possible bad situations that might occur in the future. So, we basically use worrying as a strategy, to prepare ourselves for “battle”, by trying to foresee the troubling situations and negative events that will appear in the future and make a plan on how we will respond to such stressful, negative outcomes.

Worrying is highly related to feelings of anxiety, fear and depression and is very common among various disorders, like Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Social Phobia, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Panic Disorder, Depression, Sleep Disturbances, Eating Disorders and Chronic Illnesses. It is accompanied by beliefs about the uncontrollability of worrying, the need to suppress and stop worrying, the intolerance of uncertainty it brings, catastrophic perceptions about future outcomes, emotional dysregulation, avoidance, physical tension and rumination.

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Because of all the unpleasant emotions and physical symptoms that worrying comes with, we naturally want to stop worrying. But trying to avoid or suppress worrying has the opposite effect. To deal with it effectively, we have to understand the reasons that give life to our worries. What makes us worry so much. What the core beliefs that get activated and lead us to worry about the future are. What the perception we have about our capabilities and problem-solving skills is. If we believed we can handle pretty much everything that happens in our lives, would we worry so much?

Now that we have established what worrying is and why we use it, what do we do with it? To begin with, identifying our worries is the first step of resolving the riddle of worrying. Testing the evidence we have, based on past experiences, to check whether we have a rational reason to worry about future outcomes, is useful as well. Looking back to similar past experiences and situations helps us realize that we usually exaggerate on the things we worry about and eventually we manage to overcome whatever difficulty pops in our path, based on our cognitive and behavioral resources.

Moreover, we can draw information from past situations on how to behave on possible problematic outcomes, according to what has worked well for us as a strategy and what not. Sometimes, we worry so much because we try to come up with a perfect, ideal solution for a problem. Well, in an imperfect world, perfect solutions seem a bit unrealistic. In that case, the solution could be to stick with the option that might not be perfect for us, but would be “suitable” and “good enough” for the problem we face.

Furthermore, try to distance yourself from your worries. Take some space to “see” what you worry about as an external observer. Usually we magnify problems in our head, but when we distance ourselves from the problem we are dealing with, it becomes easier to comprehend things in a different perspective, closer to the reality of the situation. Last but not least, see your problem as if it was your best friend’s problem. What would you advice your best friend over their worries? What would you suggest them to do or think or say? How would you calm them down if they asked for your help?

Worrying is an unhelpful control strategy, that in reality sacrifices our present moments and peace, just in the perspective of an ominous future outcome.

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