

Three Strategies for Working With Worry

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In these times of global change, you might find your mind lost in worry more than ever. Letting worry take over inhibits joy, health, and wise, compassionate action. It's important to be able to work with it effectively so that you can contribute to love and well-being for yourself and others.

Worry, unlike free-floating anxiety, usually has an object. In other words, there is something in particular you worry about. If you are an avid worrier, there are many "somethings" that you worry about. Worry is a tense state of mild fear usually accompanied by obsessive thinking and dire images of the future.

Mostly, worry is a habit of heart, body, and mind. But sometimes worry serves its true purpose and brings your attention to needs in a constructive way. For example, constructive worry about safety might have you put tire chains in your car before going on trip through snowy mountains. When you follow your worry to the underlying universal need, you can check in with that need and discern wise action.

At other times, when worry is a habit that triggers reactive cycles you need some way to quickly and effectively refocus your attention. Let's look at three.

1. **Prayer or wishes:** When you worry about the well-being of others, your need is clear—you have a need to contribute. The most immediate way you can redirect your mind in the moment is to offer a prayer or a wish for safety, happiness, and well-being. Whether you invoke a higher power or simply allow yourself to connect with your love and deepest wish for another, you have effectively interrupted worry and shifted yourself into a more expansive and resourced state. From this mind, you can more effectively discern wise action.
2. **Energy of the need:** When worrying about circumstances or how events are unfolding, you can interrupt worry by shifting your focus to the underlying need. For example, in these times you might find yourself worrying about the long-term effects of the ongoing pandemic. First, pause and name what you notice internally: worry, tension, tight jaw, racing thoughts, tightly held opinions, etc. As you name each thing, notice how your attention becomes less entangled in reactivity and more able to observe from a place of compassionate equanimity. Next, remind yourself that this reaction is happening because there is something deeply important to you at stake. Use the list of [universal needs](#) to name what is important in a way that is separate from your views and reactivity. You might identify needs like safety, security, family, predictability, stability, etc. Whatever needs you identify, take the time to rest in your attention on a particular need. As you do, recall little examples of how that need has been met, whether in your own life or in another's experience. Let the experience of the "met need" come alive in your body, heart, and mind, and rest your attention there as long as you can without moving to thoughts. This is called accessing the energy of the need. Accessing this energy helps you become grounded in an expansive state—one in which you are able to engage skill, wisdom, and compassion.
3. **Compassionate witnessing:** The practice of becoming a compassionate witness to worry is most easily accessed during meditation. Once you have engaged this practice many times during meditation you will be able to access it in daily life. Set your intention to watch for worry during meditation. When it comes up, welcome it and get curious. Begin noticing and naming whatever is most obvious and then move to the more subtle aspects. If you are noticing and naming the aspects of worry continuously, this practice will interrupt the habitual spinning of worry-filled stories.

Here are some aspects of worry to get curious about:

- The objects or story connected to worry
- Location of worry in your body
- Images that go with worry
- The body sensations associated with worry
- Impulses
- Other associated emotions

Worry is a valid emotion like any other. Like any emotion, its true purpose is to bring your attention to life-giving needs. It is not meant to trigger predictions of doom. When you follow emotion to the need, you can become free: free from obsessive thinking and free to take wise and skillful action to contribute to life.

Practice

Choose one of the three practices above to engage in the next time worry comes up.