

Addiction to Worry

Carole started counseling with me because she was depressed. She had been ill with chronic fatigue syndrome for a long time and believed her depression was due to this. In the course of our work together, she became aware that her depression was actually coming from her negative thinking – Carole was a constant worrier. Many words out of her mouth centered on her concerns that something bad might happen. “What if I never get well?” “What if my husband gets sick?” “What if I run out of money?” (Carole and her husband ran a very successful business and there was no indication that it would not go on being successful). “What if my son gets into drugs?” “What if my kids don’t get into good colleges?” “What if someone breaks into the house?”

Her worry was not only causing her depression, but was also contributing to her illness, if not actually causing it. Her worry caused so much stress in her body that her immune system could not do its job of keeping her well. Yet even the awareness that her worry was causing her depression and possibly even her illness did not stop Carole from worrying. She was addicted to it. She was unconsciously addicted to the sense of control that worry gave her.

I understood this well because I come from a long line of worriers. My grandmother’s whole life was about worrying. She lived with us as I was growing up and I don’t remember ever seeing her without a look of worry on her face. Same is with my mother – constant worry. Of course, I picked up on it and also became a worrier. However, unlike my mother and grandmother, who worried daily until the day they died, I decided I didn’t want to live that way. The turning point came for me the day my husband and I were going to the beach and I started to worry that the house would burn down and my children would die. I became so upset from the worry that we had to turn around and come home. I knew then that I had to do something about it.

As I started to examine the cause of worry, I realized that worriers believe that worry will stop bad things from happening. My mother worried her whole life and none of the bad things she worried about ever

happened. She concluded that nothing bad happened because she worried! She really believed that she could control things with her worry. My father, however, never worried about anything, and nothing bad ever happened to him either. My mother believed that nothing bad happened to my father because of her worry! She really believed until the day she died (from heart problems that may have been due to her constant worry) that if she stopped worrying, everything would fall apart. My father is still alive at 92, even without her worrying about him!

It is not easy to stop worrying when you have been practicing worrying for most of your life. In order for me to stop worrying, I needed to recognize that the belief that worry has control over outcomes is a complete illusion. I needed to see that, not only is worry a waste of time, but that it can have grave negative consequences on health and well-being. Once I understood this, I was able to notice the stomach clenching that occurred whenever I worried and stop the thought that was causing the stress.

Carole is in the process of learning this. She sees that her worry makes her feel very anxious and depressed. She sees that when she doesn’t worry, she is not nearly as fatigued as when she allows her addiction to worry to take over. She sees that when she stays in the moment rather than projecting into the future, she feels much better. The key for Carole in stopping worrying is in accepting that worry does not give her control.

Giving up the illusion of control that worry gives us is not easy for anyone who worries. Yet there is an interesting paradox regarding worry. I have found that when I am in the present moment, I have a much better chance of making choices that support my highest good than when I’m stuck thinking about the future. Rather than giving us control, worry prevents us from being present enough to make loving choices for ourselves and others. Worrying actually ends up giving us less control rather than more!

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