



WORRY: NOISE OR SIGNAL?

IN THIS CHAPTER

- *Examine worry and the connection between negative self-talk and distorted thinking*
- *Identify key worries in life and learn how they impact you*
- *Determine the difference between thoughts that are noise and thoughts that are signals requiring action*

Many people coming to treatment carry heavy loads of worry, fear, and anxiety. Alcohol and drug dependency, when paired with an anxiety disorder, complicates withdrawal and is linked to increased relapse rates. Co-occurring alcohol and anxiety issues interfere with progress in treatment and can create other serious issues. For the best possible outcome in treatment, it is important to treat chemical dependency and mental health issues at the same time.

DISTORTED THINKING

There are several ways to manage anxiety, including anti-depressant medication and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) or similar therapies. CBT recognizes and works to change negative thoughts that increase symptoms of anxiety and depression, and has proven to be an effective treatment. CBT will help you be inspired, encouraged, and more positive. Most people look ahead to areas they expect trouble and try to find ways to avoid problems. But in anxious or worrisome thinking, the balance between expecting the worst and expecting good things is uneven. Anxious thinking is distorted thinking, meaning you may believe or see things inaccurately, and cause yourself distress. Negative self-talk can magnify anxiety, cause an increased stress response, leave you unable to act, and slow down your recovery process.

WHAT'S YOUR WORRY?

People with co-occurring disorders often worry about health, medical conditions, legal problems, financial matters, future problems, work stress, the opinions of friends, family, and coworkers, and a number of other possible concerns.

LEARN TO IDENTIFY what you can control and what you cannot.

NOTES

Below are some worries common to those with a co-occurring disorder. Check those that apply to you and write some of your own worries on the lines below.

- What if I have a relapse?
- What if my spouse leaves me?
- What if my health gets worse?
- What will happen to my job?
- What will the judge do to me?
- What will my children think of me?

It can be difficult to accept there are things you cannot control, change, or anticipate. Learning to identify what you can control and what you cannot will make a difference between worrying continually and enjoying your life. Stress and worry are the enemies of sobriety and can lead you to lose your focus, rationalize destructive choices, and fall back into unhealthy habits.

What are some negative consequences of your worry?

WORRY WILL RUIN YOUR LIFE

Worry is the mental habit of repeating future concerns. Most people worry occasionally and can name common situations or problems that cause concern. These difficulties may include:

- Marriage or relationship problems
- Safety of family members
- What others may think of you
- Financial pressures
- Legal problems
- Weather
- Health
- Job-related stress
- Other relationships
- Substance use difficulties

Worry becomes a problem when it invades your life, continues to occupy more time, and makes concerns seem bigger than they really need to be.

Many people suffer from unrelenting anxiety-related problems, including difficulty sleeping, stomach trouble, and headaches. They worry themselves into an early grave or fret away their precious life, perhaps seeking diversion through alcohol, drugs, or shopping. Author and pastor Leith Anderson puts it this way: "Worry will ruin your life! It will age your face, gray your hair, ulcer your stomach, and sour your whole outlook on life. It is a bitter acid that drips and drips until it eats away your life from the inside out." (Anderson, n.d.).

THE WORRIER'S CHECKLIST

Negative, distorted, and exaggerated thinking is common in worry. Consider the following distortions and check those you relate to.

A worrier:

- Assumes things will turn out badly
- Is afraid things will get worse
- Is distracted from the present with concerns about the future
- Reviews unfavorable and negative scenarios
- Watches carefully for small signs of trouble, convinced the worst is about to happen
- Is often upset and filled with mental anguish
- Is overly concerned with things that aren't right
- Worries about what others will think
- Looks for what could go wrong
- Is inconsolable regarding their concerns
- Anticipates potential failure, rejection, comments, or disapproval from others
- Is preoccupied with safety or health

Which of the items above are troublesome for you?

In the past, what strategies have you used to cope with worry and concerns? List both positive and negative strategies.

NOISE OR SIGNAL?

Worry can be controlled by taking charge of things we can change and accepting what we cannot. When a thought pops into your mind, decide whether you can change, alter, fix, or control whatever you are thinking about. This would be considered a signal for action, and you can decide if the thought is accurate. If it is a legitimate concern, pay attention to it. But if you cannot change anything about the subject matter, consider it noise. This strategy begins to group thoughts into either things you can change or things you cannot.



NOTES

Some thoughts are **PROMPTS AND SIGNALS** for action and other thoughts are just **NOISE**.

NOTES

LISTEN OR IGNORE?

Think back to a commercial you heard telling you to come down and buy a new car. This thought was not a prompt for you to act. You made an immediate determination you do not need a car or have time to look at one, considered it simply the noise of life, and ignored it. In this way, our thoughts are like commercials that never seem to stop. Psychologist Reid Wilson makes a distinction between thoughts that are important to heed and other thoughts that are merely distractions (Wilson, 2016). Some thoughts are prompts and signals for action and others are just noise. It is important to recognize what might be a signal for one person may be noise for another. For example, you heard gas prices were going up. If you have a half-tank or less, you may take it as a signal to fill the tank while prices are lower. But if your tank is already full, or you don't have a car, the information is noise and can be ignored.

Worry is best handled by deciding what is a prompt for action, and what is merely noise and can be disregarded. Challenging your thinking will help reduce the intensity, frequency, and duration of anxious symptoms. Use the exercise below as practice. Read through each statement and circle SIGNAL if it requires action and NOISE if it is something you can ignore.

SIGNAL	Buy a new car today	NOISE
SIGNAL	I don't have much gas left	NOISE
SIGNAL	I have a headache	NOISE
SIGNAL	I promised my mom I would call	NOISE
SIGNAL	The baby is crying	NOISE
SIGNAL	I have a big presentation tomorrow	NOISE
SIGNAL	My boss wants to see me	NOISE
SIGNAL	My shoe is untied	NOISE
SIGNAL	My shoes are old and worn out	NOISE
SIGNAL	She looked at me funny	NOISE
SIGNAL	I heard gas prices might go up	NOISE
SIGNAL	The Visa bill is due tomorrow	NOISE
SIGNAL	I should go to an AA meeting	NOISE
SIGNAL	I never get any good breaks	NOISE

When you start to worry, it is helpful to first figure out if the worry is noise or a signal. Being tentative and saying, "this might be something important," increases worry and anxiety. If the thought is a signal that danger or legitimate problems are ahead, action will be required. Pay attention to these signals. If you determined the thoughts are noise, with strength and power, declare them as such, and choose to ignore them. Be forceful and decisive, telling yourself, "I don't have to act on this. I can ignore it. This is just noise and does not require a response." Ignore the noise and accept your own decision.

PRACTICE MAKES PROGRESS

Assume each thought below is a signal. Write an action step for each one.

Thought

Action Step

I have a headache.

The baby is crying.

The car is making a funny noise.

I don't have enough money for a new lawnmower.

My friend called three times in the last hour.

My boss wants to talk to me.

WORRY BUSTERS

Because worrisome situations can happen at any time, it is important to be prepared for them. Below is a list of positive, affirming statements. Choose several you believe and can claim. Review them regularly and when worry sets in, remind yourself of the truths they hold.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I can get through this | <input type="checkbox"/> I am making progress |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I don't need to worry about this right now | <input type="checkbox"/> I'm becoming solution focused |
| <input type="checkbox"/> This is just noise | <input type="checkbox"/> I am secure and confident |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I can manage this | <input type="checkbox"/> I can make good choices |
| <input type="checkbox"/> This is an opportunity to grow | <input type="checkbox"/> Each day is filled with hope |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm getting stronger | <input type="checkbox"/> I am at peace |
| <input type="checkbox"/> This is trivial | <input type="checkbox"/> I do not need to worry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Everyone goes through these things | <input type="checkbox"/> I can find internal strength in difficult circumstances |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I can cope | <input type="checkbox"/> I am up for a challenge |

NOTES

Remind yourself of
the **TRUTH**.

*The key to a
**PEACE-FILLED
MINDSET** is to
stay focused on the
present moment.*

PEACE THAT PASSES UNDERSTANDING

Anxiety can creep into our thinking, almost without us noticing. It is often filled with irrational and exaggerated thoughts. Worry feeds on what might go wrong in the near future. The key to a peace-filled mindset is to stay focused on the present moment when you can. Solve problems whenever you can and dismiss thoughts about things you cannot control. The better you become at sorting signals and noise, and dealing with them appropriately, the more peaceful life can become.

NOTES

SOURCES

Anderson, L. (n.d.) *How to win over worry*. Faith Matters: Wooddale Church. Retrieved August 2016 from <http://faithmatters.wooddale.org/transcripts/Phillipians/FAITH%20MATTERS%20-%20Phillipians%2320%20-%20How%20To%20Win%20Over%20Worry.pdf>

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