



Dealing with incessant worrying

Thoughts are sensitive to attention. By telling yourself that you shouldn't think about a particular thought, that thought only gets bigger. The attempt at avoiding it works against you. You unwittingly give it even more attention, making the thought even harder to shake. On the other end of the scale, completely ignoring the thought or pretending it isn't there doesn't work either. This time you are thinking: "I must ignore that thought", whereby you are actually thinking about exactly the thought you are trying to ignore! Both strategies make the unwanted thought even bigger than it was to start with, which is why "pushing the thought out of your mind" seldom works. So, what does work?

Many have found the following three-step technique effective:

1. Recognition
2. Acceptance
3. Parking

So you first recognise the thought ('Oh, there you are, I know you'). Next you accept it ('I know you are there. You're allowed to be here'). The last step is to park the thought ('I don't have time for you right now, I am busy with ...'). This way the thought receives minimal yet sufficient attention, without placing unnecessary stress on yourself. The three-step approach costs a lot less energy than avoiding or ignoring what you don't want to think about.

This strategy doesn't work straightaway and definitely not if you apply it only once. It needs to become second nature. So make it a habit by using it time and again. In the beginning it might not work at all, perhaps the thought will leave you for a few minutes. Gradually as you keep applying the same strategy the thought will receive less attention from you, ask less attention of you and finally lose its hold over you.

For many thoughts this is sufficient. This strategy prevents the thought from overly disrupting your attention. Some worries require a more thorough analysis. For these worries an additional step is necessary, sometimes referred to as a worry-stop. The first two steps are the same: You first recognise the thought ('Oh, there you are, I know you'). Next you accept it ('I know you're there and you're allowed to be here'). Now comes the extra step. You don't delve into the thought or defend yourself from it, but take a notebook (which you carry with you all the time) or your smartphone and note telegram-style what the thought is about. You agree with yourself to deal with this worry later on and then park it ('I don't have time for you right now, I am busy with ...').

The essential ingredient for this strategy to work, is to actually spend a quarter of an hour every day to work out these worries. Don't do this just before going to bed, it raises the chance you will disrupt your sleep. Early in the evening is usually a good time. Set an alarm and spend the quarter of an hour thinking about the worries you have noted.

Some critical questions are:

- 'What is the worst that can happen?'
- 'Is there anything I can do about this?'
- 'How important is this?'

When the time is up, stop and go do some other (preferably relaxing) activity (watch television, go for a shower or a walk, etc).

Also this strategy requires some practice before you will reap results, so do it consistently for at least 21 days before evaluating whether it works for you. In summary, use the following steps in dealing with incessant worries:

1. 'Oh, there you are, I know you' (recognition).
2. 'I know you're there, you're allowed to be here' (acceptance).
3. [Optionally: Note the worry in telegram style (worry-stop).]
4. 'I am busy right now, I need to get on with what I was doing. I am busy with ... ' (parking).

And once a day withdraw for a quarter of an hour to work out the worries you have noted.