How to stop worrying. Challenge anxious thoughts

If you suffer from chronic anxiety and worries, chances are you look at the world in ways that make it seem more dangerous than it really is. For example, you may overestimate the possibility that things will turn out badly, jump immediately to worst-case scenarios, or treat every negative thought as if it were fact. You may also discredit your own ability to handle life’s problems, assuming you will fall apart at the first sign of trouble. These irrational, pessimistic attitudes are known as cognitive distortions.

Although cognitive distortions are not based on reality, they are not easy to give up. Often, they are part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that is become so automatic you are not even completely aware of it. In order to break these bad thinking habits and stop the worry and anxiety they bring, you must retrain your brain.

Start by identifying the frightening thought, being as detailed as possible about what scares or worries you. Then, instead of viewing your thoughts as facts, treat them as hypotheses you are testing out. As you examine and challenge your worries and fears, you will develop a more balanced perspective.

Stop worry by questioning the worried thought:

- What is the evidence that the thought is true? That it is not true?
- Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?
- What is the probability that what I am scared of will actually happen?
- If the probability is low, what are some more likely outcomes?
- Is the thought helpful? How will worrying about it help me and how will it hurt me?
- What would I say to a friend who had this worry?

Cognitive Distortions that Add to Anxiety, Worry, and Stress

All-or-nothing thinking - Looking at things in black-or-white categories, with no middle ground. “If I fall short of perfection, I am a total failure.”

Overgeneralization - Generalizing from a single negative experience, expecting it to hold true forever. “I did not get hired for the job. I will never get any job.”
The mental filter - Focusing on the negatives while filtering out all the positives. Noticing the one thing that went wrong, rather than all the things that went right.

Diminishing the positive - Coming up with reasons why positive events do not count. “I did well on the presentation, but that was just dumb luck.”

Jumping to conclusions - Making negative interpretations without actual evidence. You act like a mind reader, “I can tell she secretly hates me.” Or a fortune teller, “I just know something terrible is going to happen.”

Catastrophizing - Expecting the worst-case scenario to happen. “The pilot said we are in for some turbulence. The plane is going to crash!”

Emotional reasoning - Believing that the way you feel reflects reality. “I feel frightened right now. That must mean I am in real physical danger.”

‘Shoulds’ and ‘should-nots’ - Holding yourself to a strict list of what you should and should not do and beating yourself up if you break any of the rules

Labeling - Labeling yourself based on mistakes and perceived shortcomings. “I am a failure; an idiot; a loser.”

Personalization - Assuming responsibility for things that are outside your control. “It is my fault my son got in an accident. I should have warned him to drive carefully in the rain.”