

Coaching the Worrywart

Many patients with persistent pain worry. Will the pain go away? What will happen if I don't get better? What if I can't return to work? Worry keeps problems at the forefront of a patient's mind and can stimulate successful problem solving when the factors contributing to the problem are understood and constructive and achievable solutions are identified.

Unfortunately, when the factors contributing to a problem are complex and a solution is not apparent, patients in pain can get trapped in a 'perseverance loop', repeatedly directing mental energy into a fruitless circuit of maladaptive cognitions. (1) How can we help patients break free from the self-limiting loop of worry? I would like to share a strategy I offer patients to help them move from worry to healthy choices.

First, I reflect back, "It is my impression that you spend time worrying about your situation." Sometimes I'll ask, "Do you tend to worry a lot?" If they agree, then the door is open to ask, "Would you be interested in an idea that could help you better deal with or reduce your worrying? It has helped some of my other patients and I was thinking, it just might help you."

I tell patients that it can be helpful to step back and look at worry more objectively, like a scientist. Then I explain, "If you examine the nature of worry, you'll see it is often associated with the future." I go on to offer, "It is easy for anyone to feel overwhelmed by the unknowns of tomorrow. The truth is, none of us know what the future will bring. Our power lies in taking care of ourselves as best we can today. Plan for tomorrow, but don't live there. The present moment is where your power resides. This is where you have control and can make the skillful choices that support the best today and serve as the foundation for tomorrow."

"So, when you find your mind caught in worry, step back and notice it. See it for what it is: just a worry thought. Ask yourself, "Is this a thought I want to give my energy to?" Take a slow, deep breath. Because we breathe in the present moment, paying attention to your breath will shift your mind from the unknowns of tomorrow back to the here and now. Reflect: Is there a skillful choice that I can make right now or something I could do today that can support my well-being? Put your energy into taking care of yourself as best you can today. This helps create the healthiest today and supports conditions for a healthier tomorrow."

"Or, you can think of your mind as like a garden and worry is like a seed in that garden. Is this a seed you want to water? Notice how it feels in your body when you worry. Consider how you would comfort and support a good friend if he or she were dealing with a challenging medical condition. What would you say? Think of this as a seed of wisdom. Try talking to yourself as you would a good friend. Notice how this feels in your body. When you talk to yourself as you would a good friend, you water the seed of wisdom and weaken the seed of worry."

1. Eccleston C, Crombez G. Worry and chronic pain: a misdirected problem solving model. *Pain*. 2007;123(3):233-6.

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