

# Dealing With Persistent Worry



Worry serves a useful function when it helps us plan or problem-solve. But it is unproductive when people worry endlessly about worst-case scenarios that have little chance of happening. Persistent worry can interfere with your ability to do your job or to enjoy life fully. Whatever kind of worry you may have, there are effective ways to help you regain your peace of mind.

## What Is Persistent Worry?

Experts agree that persistent worry—often referred to as rumination, a kind of obsessive thinking—is a common response when dealing with stressful events or uncertainty. People who ruminate have difficulty concentrating and focusing on the here and now. Their minds stay focused on bad things that have happened or that they think could happen. They may also develop insomnia. When persistent worry is severe, it may be a symptom of a more serious condition. Some people will suffer from an anxiety disorder such as panic disorder or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Scientists have not yet determined what causes people to become worriers. Environmental factors, such as parental behavior, appear to have an impact as well as genetics and brain chemistry.

## Signs of a Problem

Worriers typically report feeling:

- Discomfort with success or fear of failure
- Lack of self-confidence/constant need for reassurance being overly critical of oneself and/or others
- Fear of confrontation/preference for isolation procrastination/inability to make decisions perfectionism
- Fragile self-esteem
- Physical pain in response to stress
- Gloomy daydreams/pessimism
- Extreme superstition
- High anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating
- Highly sensitive/easily embarrassed

Here are some of the forms that persistent worry may take:

**Hypervigilance.** With this type of worry, the person is always on edge, feels easily threatened, and has trouble relaxing. Everyday activities can cause them to worry. For instance, if the person has to catch an early morning train, they might not be able to stop thinking about what will happen if the alarm doesn't go off on time. Such people are agitated and often feel angry with themselves and others.

**Insomnia.** Lack of sleep, a problem that's become prevalent worldwide, can affect physical and mental health and interfere with daily activities. While some people have trouble falling asleep, others have trouble staying asleep. They often get trapped in a vicious cycle of worry because the insomnia itself becomes another source of worry.

**Mental health conditions.** If persistent worry is interfering with normal work or social relationships, a mental health condition may be present.

- In *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)*, a person who has endured a traumatic event, such as sexual assault, may be flooded by fears of it happening again.
- A person with *generalized anxiety disorder* may be plagued by unrealistic fears about possible misfortune when the risk is low or non-existent (for example, having a high-paying job but worrying about going bankrupt).
- *Social phobia* causes people to avoid a wide range of social situations (such as giving a speech) because of excessive worry about being embarrassed or humiliated.
- In *obsessive-compulsive disorder*, a person is bothered by obsessions (say, fear of contamination) and engages in repetitive behaviors, like hand washing, in an attempt to cope.
- Worry can also lead to *depression*, a disorder characterized by a low mood, decreased energy, and poor concentration.

**Medical problems.** Worry can affect your immune system and make you physically sick, contributing to high blood pressure, back pain, digestive problems, rashes, and headaches. If you are experiencing any concerning symptoms, it is important to contact your doctor to rule out any other medical conditions.

### Self-Help Strategies

Since worry is often a deeply ingrained habit, you can't expect to change it overnight. But you can develop new coping skills that will, over time, help you retrain your brain to greatly reduce the extent of your worrying.

**Let your worries in and then let your worries go.** If you tend to worry excessively, it's important to accept this part of yourself for now. You might be able to relax by setting a limit on how long you allow yourself to worry. For example, you might spend 20 minutes a day letting your mind run free with worries, setting a timer so you know when time is up. Afterward, you can tell yourself that it's OK to now let go of your worries. If the worries return say, "Stop! I've finished worrying about this."

**Take action.** After making a realistic assessment of a worry, you might find that taking action puts your mind at ease. For instance, if you worry that you might not be preparing your tax return properly, you might hire an accountant. Starting to prepare the papers ahead of time might keep you from worrying about not having done anything at all.

**Stay connected.** Isolation can cause worrying to spin out of control. You might try to talk to a supportive person for a few minutes. Confiding in others about your worries can help. Voicing feelings of anger and frustration is also a useful coping skill.

**Make lifestyle changes.** Exercising for 30 minutes or more on most days of the week can give you a space to release the anxiety and help you to keep calm. Exercise is likely to help you to release your energy making it easier to sleep at night. A healthy diet is an important factor, too. Sugar, caffeine, and processed food can contribute to anxiety and even to depression.

**Be aware of early clues that you might be going into a worry cycle.** Our bodies let us know when we are upset, sometimes before we actually become aware of it. Symptoms might include muscle tension, elevated anxiety, and the beginning of intrusive and negative thoughts. Try to relax, focus on something else, call someone, go for a walk, or do something else to break the cycle.

**Try meditation.** You might make sure that you carve out a little quiet time for yourself each day. If meditation doesn't appeal to you, try listening to music or doing yoga.

**Accept that some things are beyond your control.** Unexpected traumatic events do occur. But worrying about possible disasters isn't going to make you any safer. It is important to realize that your sphere of control is limited. That way, you can take charge of the things you can control and let go of the things you can't.

**Stay in the present.** Negatively projecting into the future or constantly returning to the past will increase your anxiety. No one can change the past or foresee the future. When people view things negatively, they tend to exaggerate the possibilities, problems, and potential outcomes. Meditation can help you stay in the present.

**Be a problem solver.** By realistically appraising your situation and focusing on the solution (instead of the problem), you have a better chance of interpreting things clearly and more positively. Write down your worry and make a list of actions you can take to resolve it. This will help you accurately assess what needs to be done in order to move from immobilization into action.

**Remember that everyone has worries throughout life.** People who don't worry persistently approach difficult situations as concerns that need to be addressed rather than impediments. They are more likely to have a positive attitude and feel they have the ability to cope with the situation, even if the outcome isn't favorable.

## Treatment Options

If you have a mental health condition or if self-help strategies don't ease your insomnia or worry, you may need to seek counseling from a mental health professional. Cognitive therapy, also known as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), can help with worry. CBT is a form of psychotherapy that enables a person to talk about worries and fears and is used in treating anxiety disorders, such as social phobia or generalized anxiety disorder. CBT explores how you react to situations and how to recognize thought patterns that cause anxiety. It often helps with specific phobias—for example, a fear of flying. With either type of therapy, people often notice an improvement after 10 to 12 weekly sessions.

If you are having a lot of difficulty engaging in everyday activities, you may want to try medication in addition to counseling. Anti-anxiety medications can improve your sleep and/or help you face situations that make you very uncomfortable. Antidepressants can give you more energy if you are feeling immobilized and listless due to worry. Your therapist or health care provider can give you more information about medications.

### **Where to Get Help or More Information**

**Contact the Caterpillar Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** Caterpillar's global EAP is a free, voluntary and completely confidential service provided to employees and their eligible family members to help meet many challenges—including persistent worry—at home and work. The EAP is also a referral source for those in need - supervisory, peer or family member referrals. The goal of the EAP is to assess your needs, provide short-term services to help resolve personal problems, and then provide information and referrals for specialized or longer-term services if needed.

The EAP is available in 47 languages and includes 24/7 access online, by phone, and via the LifeWorks app. Many Caterpillar locations also offer onsite services. For access in North America or general support, call **+1-866-CAT(228)-0565**. More information as well as global helplines can be found at [CaterpillarEAP.com](https://www.caterpillar.com/eap).

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