

The Worry Time Technique

A few of our other documents have referred to the worry time technique (see 'Managing Anxiety During The Coronavirus Pandemic' and 'Self Care during Social Distancing'), so here is how to do it!

Firstly, what is worry?

Worrying is the process of thinking excessively about negative things that could occur in the future.

We worry for a good reason.

If we worry about getting run over crossing the road, we will pay more attention and be safer on the roads. If we worry about spreading coronavirus, we are more likely to wash our hands more and follow government guidance.

When we have an element of control, then worry can help us to keep safe.

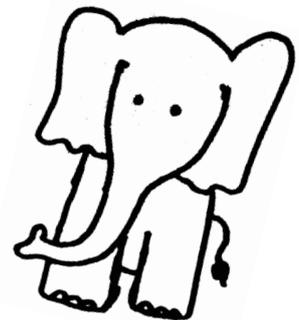
However, when we are not in control of a situation our worrying has no use, and what's more it increases our anxiety, which in turn reduces our physical and mental health (see 'Managing Anxiety During The Coronavirus Pandemic' for more information and ideas on this).

Can we stop worry?

When we try specifically not to think about something, we often end up thinking about it more.

For example, try really hard right now not to think of a pink elephant. Spend a good minute not thinking about a pink elephant.

How many times in that minute did you in fact think of a pink elephant? Probably more than if you had just carried on with your usual thought processes!



So, if we want to spend less time thinking about something simply trying not to think about it won't work. Also, as explained above, some worrying can be helpful for keeping us safe. Therefore **the worry time technique is not about stopping worrying, but about reducing the amount of time we spend worrying about things outside of our control.**

We can then spend the time we aren't worrying doing productive things, like looking after our mental health, planning for the next week, and connecting with others who are having a tough time at the moment.

There are three parts to the worry time technique:

1. Set up your worry time

Your worry time is an allotted time during the day in which you are allowed to worry. It is usually advised to make this a 15 minute period, at this time it is probably a good idea to include news-reading in your worry time. Therefore you might want to give yourself 15 minutes for reading the news or online articles about coronavirus, and 15 for your own personal worries. **Your worry time should not be longer than 30 minutes!** Try setting a timer if you think you might go over this.

How long will you make your worry time?

Your worry time should happen at the **same time every day**. Different times work for different people but it's a good idea to have it late enough in the day that you will actually have things to worry about, but early enough that you have time to pick your mood back up and do some relaxation before bed. 6 or 7pm works for a lot of people, as cooking and eating dinner can also be effective ways to stop worrying at the end of your worry time.

What time will you do your worry time?

Your worry time needs to take place **somewhere uncomfortable** and that is not associated with rest. If you do your worry time in or on your bed, your bed will become associated with worry, which isn't helpful for sleep! It is also helpful to be somewhere that you don't want to stay much longer than 30 minutes. Consider taking your worry time on a hard chair pushed away from where you sleep/work/relax, or sat outside on a step or bench (maintaining distance from others).

Where will you do your worry time?

You need to be able to **stop your worry time** once the 15-30 minutes is up. Have an activity that you will do straight after that will move your attention away from the worries. Here are some ideas:

- Call a friend to speak about things OTHER THAN coronavirus
- Play an instrument, or a game you enjoy
- Cook a meal or make a hot drink and snack
- Watch a favourite TV programme or read a book

What activity will you do to end your worry time?

2. Postpone your worries at all times other than your worry time

During the day when a worry thought comes to you (a thought about something bad happening in your future that you cannot immediately do anything about), write it down. You could:

- Put your worries on post-it notes and stick them on your door/fridge
- Write them down in a notebook that you keep on your desk
- Write them in a note on your phone

Then in your worry time you will come back to this list and think about each worry then.

Where will you write down your worry thoughts?

Once you have written it down, do something to postpone that worry, by moving your attention to something else. You could:

- Go for a run or a walk and pay close attention to the things around you (other people, the plants, the weather, the sounds etc.)
- Do a guided meditation or yoga session from online
- Call someone, and talk about things OTHER than coronavirus
- Read a book
- Look through photos that remind you of positive memories
- Make a hot drink and get a snack

What things will you try to postpone your worries?

3. Using my worry time effectively



In your worry time you will come back to your list of worries that you've written down as they came up during the day. For each one, ask yourself **can I do anything to control or change this thing I'm worried about?**

If the answer is YES then **make a plan** and share it with someone supportive who can help with it even if just by keeping you accountable to following through on it.

For example you might:

- *Be worried about someone who is not following social distancing guidance properly, so make a plan to talk to them and think about how to do this compassionately*
- *Be worried about living on your own and having to self-isolate so make a plan to ask people if they'd help you with your food shops*

- *Be worried about your own or others' mental health during this time, so make a plan to spend 30minutes or an hour a day working through self-help resources such as those on this page, or doing a mindfulness course.*
- *Be worried about living with a vulnerable person, so make a plan with them to protect them.*

If the answer is NO then ask yourself if it is worth worrying about that thing (using up your time and energy and increasing your anxiety which could reduce your immune function in time), or could you let it go?

Letting go of worries is very difficult, but self-compassion and mindfulness exercises can often help. There are a number of good online resources for accessing mindfulness classes and guided meditations (see our other posts/signposting page for these), and look out for our document on 'Self-compassion in Self-isolation' for ideas about compassion exercises.



A summary of the worry time technique:

I will allot myself ____ minutes (15-30, no more!) of worry time a day, in which I can read news articles on coronavirus, and just spend some time sitting and worrying. My worry time will happen at __: __ every day, and I will do it in/at/on _____ (not my bedroom or anywhere too comfortable where I might start to 'enjoy' the worrying). Outside of my worry time, if a worry thought comes into my mind I will write it down (on my phone or a post-it note) to come back to in my worry time, and will then 'postpone' the worry using one of the below methods:

- Go for a run or a walk and pay close attention to the things around me (other people, the plants, the weather, the sounds etc.)
- Do a guided meditation or yoga session from online
- Call someone, and chat about something OTHER than coronavirus
- Read a book
- Look through photos that remind me of positive memories
- Make a hot drink and get a snack
- Other: _____
- Other: _____