

WHAT IS WORRY?

The dictionary defines worry as “a cause of uneasiness, anxiety; trouble” or “to suffer from disturbing thoughts; fret”.¹ According to the encyclopedia, worry is “negative self-talk that often distracts the mind from focusing on the problem at hand”.² Aside from being a fearful distraction, worry acts as a barrier that blocks you from your best self. When you are in a state of intense worry, you have extremely limited access to things like intuition, knowledge, talent, peace, love, and appreciation. Instead, you have increased access to emotions that are more “compatible” with worry, such as anxiety, fear, and depression.

As an example, many people have a tendency to “under perform” while being watched, especially on tasks that are difficult or not fully mastered. This is because fear and anxiety creep in as soon as you start to worry about what others are thinking, and this fear blocks you from your knowledge and skills. However, in the absence of an observer, you’re not worried and then once again have free access to your abilities. As another example, have you ever struggled to find the right words in the middle of a stressful argument, only to have those perfect words come easily after the argument has ended? Worry generates fear, and fear erects barriers that cloud your mind.

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For many of us, worry is a habitual pattern that has been with us for a long time. Although worry always produces unease in the body and mind, it can be so automatic that we may not even realize we are doing it. Keep in mind that the longer an episode of worrying lasts, the more the habit is strengthened. If you can learn to quickly focus away from the worry, you’ll eventually reduce the frequency and duration of your worry episodes.

HOW WORRY AFFECTS THE MIND AND BODY

Since worry always produces stress, its impact can only be understood by examining how stress affects the mind and body, in which case we need to start with the brain. Located deep within the brain, are two almond-shaped groups of neurons called the amygdalas. The amygdala has been shown in research to perform a primary role in the processing and memory of emotional reactions. It is involved in the genesis of many fear responses, including freezing (immobility), rapid heartbeat, increased respiration, and stress-hormone release.³

The amygdala serves an evolutionary purpose and can be thought of as the brain’s “panic button”, which prepares the body for “flight or fight”. When the amygdala activates the panic alarm, it induces a cascade of physiological changes that ends with a flood of stress hormones, mainly Cortisol. Under stress, the body secretes enough hormones for a single bout of fight or flight. However, once secreted, the hormones stay in the body for several hours. So if you have successive upsets, the body keeps adding stress hormones to the levels already there, which produces an additive effect.⁴ That is why sometimes the littlest thing can throw us over the edge, just like the old saying about the “straw that broke the camel’s back”.

Stress hormones impact the body in many ways. One major effect is an increase in blood flow and heart rate. As the heart rate shoots up, blood is shunted away from the brain’s higher cognitive centers to other sites that

1 *dictionary.com*, (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/worry>).

2 *wikipedia.org*, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/worry>).

3 *wikipedia.org*, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/amygdala>).

4 Daniel Goleman, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 75.