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A Prescription for Worry Warts

Dear Communications Doctor,
I'm a person who spends entirely too much time worrying. This habit is eating me alive. How can I avoid over-worrying? And is there such a thing as good worrying?
Jerry Miami, FL

Dear Jerry,
I'm glad you asked this question, since how to deal with excessive worry is often a popular topic that is brought up during the workshops I conduct for healthcare organizations and associations. My first prescription is to get all of those worries out of your head and onto a sheet of paper. By conducting an inventory of your worries, you'll be well on your way to stopping these worry warts from growing. So, find a place free of distractions, roll up your sleeves and begin listing your worries on a sheet of paper.

As you delve into this project, you may find yourself amazed at how long your list grows. To help you organize your list, categorize your worries under specific headers. Worries over work, family, friends, finance, household, spirituality, and yes, even worry about worrying can take a toll on our mind and body. Once your list is complete, take each section and rank order your worries in order of largest to smallest. Then next to each worry, indicate whether or not you can take action. If action can't be taken, shelve the worry until you can take action. If action can be taken, next to the individual worry indicate in one or more clear sentences your plan of attack and a reasonable timeline in which you will complete these actions.

Now you are in a position to treat your "worries list" like an emergency room triage. As you probably know, a triage determines which patient's needs are the greatest who is seen first based on the seriousness of the condition. By sorting out your worries in this way, you can begin to tackle them one by one. Making a list of worries also allows you an opportunity to look at your worries objectively - as individual items that can be treated or tended to at a later time.

When I think about worry, I'm often reminded of Earl Nightingale's memorable story that compares worry to "a dense fog that can cloud our vision, knock our perspective out of kilter, and slow us down." According to his 1969 classic, *This is Earl Nightingale*, we need to condense our worries to a size that they truly deserve.

The statistics on worry echo Nightingale's advice, as several recent studies indicate that over 85% of all that we worry about never happens. These include worries over our past which can never be changed, worries over which we have no control, irrational concerns or fears, and future worries. Curiously enough, often as I share these statistics with individuals who attend my workshops, I inevitably will have one or two individuals who ask, "but what about the 15%!" My response? Whether 15 percent or 1 percent, worrying never affects the final outcome. Think about it. Have you ever worried a problem away? As we all know, the answer is NO! As a healthcare provider, I know that you are keenly aware of excessive negative impact that worry can have on our bodies. Chemicals released during extended periods of worry wreck havoc on our physical being, with symptoms ranging from headaches to high blood pressure. Chronic worriers are prone to heart conditions and as a general rule are not too much fun to be around. Thus worriers often experience feelings of loneliness as isolation as individuals flee from their forecasts of doom and gloom.

As I write I'm reminded of a piece of advice that was passed along to me by my now 91-year-old grandmother Bopp who once shared the following: "Honey, there's no sense in making mountains out of mole hills, as all it does is exhaust the mole."

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. Gaddis' workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations are packed with tips and techniques that can be immediately applied for successful results. Gaddis also provides quality training and executive coaching for organizations, corporations, and associations across the United States. For more information, call 919-933-3237 or visit www.CommunicationsDoctor.com.