

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY KNOWING HOW TO WORRY EFFECTIVELY

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People love predictions. There are stock predictions and weather forecasts; the ancients had oracles and soothsayers; the scientific method itself is fundamentally a tool to test our predictions.

This is all good stuff, for the most part. The more accurately we can estimate what is likely to happen, the more effective we can be in navigating the course ahead.

There is a downside, however. Since we can anticipate what *may* happen in the future, this also allows us to *worry* about the future. And we tend to give our imaginations more credit than they deserve.

Anticipating events to come so that we can take effective action is invaluable. But worry is a different animal; worry is what we do when we don't know what to do, when we don't have enough information, or when events are outside of our control.

Worrying is ruminating about the future. In the same way that we can get stuck and helpless in painful memories from the past, worry is a passive, helpless stance in relation to events that may happen in the future; and it drains us of the energy and spirit to act effectively where we can.

So let's take a step beyond Bob Marley's advice to just "be happy" (while that's a good first step!) and talk about how to take effective action when worrying. So...

Just as you cannot change the past by ruminating, you cannot change the future by worrying. Planning and acting is one thing; worrying is quite another.

Think about something that you do well. Do you ever worry about it? Sure, you *think* about it, you *prepare* for it, you act on it. But do you *worry*? Do you sit helplessly thinking about all the things that could go wrong, and how awful it would be if they did go wrong?

Probably not that much.

There is nothing passive about this. The satisfaction of doing something well is one of the great joys of life.

Sometimes worry can be a way of avoiding possible solutions that we don't want to consider. We are creatures of habit. We like what's familiar and we can go to great lengths to keep things the same – even if what we're used to isn't working very well. Our habits can blind us to opportunities for taking effective action, leaving us to worry instead.

If you find yourself worrying too much, ask yourself this question: "What action could I take that would make things better *if I let go of my preconceived vision of how everything has to be?*"

This can open up possibilities you hadn't considered before, and that may be just where the best solutions are waiting to be discovered.

Now, the fact is there is a lot that we don't have control over; and therefore plenty that we *can* worry about. It's

important to acknowledge this, too. A good and effective life is not lived in denial.

What do we do, then, when we're anticipating things we don't control? Sometimes facing our worries directly can help – and that means clarifying the best *and* worst possibilities. This three-step process can help (courtesy of Martin Seligman):

1. *Think of the worst-case scenario.* Then think of one action you can take this week that would make that less likely to occur.
2. *Think of the best-case scenario.* Then think of one action you can take this week that would make that more likely to occur.
3. *Think of the most likely scenario.* Then think of one action you can take this week to prepare to deal with it well.

By clarifying our worst fears and our greatest hopes, we usually find that neither is the most likely outcome. More often than not, the most likely outcome is something we can affect. By taking action to prevent the worst, promote the best, and cope with the most likely scenarios, we lift ourselves out of helpless worry, and into a more active and effective stance.

I am not suggesting that we deny true catastrophes. Some things are too terrible for words, and we have to find a way to cope with them as best as we can. But for most of the things that we worry about, there's usually a way through that is not as bad as we imagine.

If you find yourself worrying, remind yourself that the future has not happened yet, and we may have more say in how things turn out than we imagine. Focus instead on *what can be done* to make a better outcome more likely – even if what we can do is only a very little bit. That little bit is probably still much better than the helplessness of worry.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

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