

Worry & problem solving

FACTSHEET

Worry is a normal process. It is normal to worry about something that you or somebody else will have to do at some point, or to worry about concerns e.g. family, health, finances. Often we worry when we do not know the outcome, and the worry can be in the form of 'What if...'

There are two main types of worry, either worrying about real events, or worrying about possible or hypothetical events. When we worry we tend to think about potential negative situations, and this can make us feel anxious or scared. The negative situations and the fear can then stop us from doing things, as we focus on all the negative things that can happen, rather than the possible positive outcomes.

TECHNIQUES FOR MANAGING WORRY

WRITING WORRIES DOWN

Writing down worries can be a helpful 'letting go' strategy. It can help take them out of your head and can help to look at them for what they are. You can use a diary or a list. Sometimes it can be helpful to put them in a box. This will allow you to close the lid and walk away from them.

WORRY TIME

When we try to manage each worry when it arrives, we can soon find our worries overlapping and before we know it, we are worrying all of the time and don't feel like we are getting anywhere.

Worry time is a technique by which you set aside some time each day to focus on your worries. The aim is to give yourself an allocated period of time to focus solely on your worries, with no other distractions around. This means that for the rest of the day you need to put your worries to one side and remind yourself that you can worry about them during your worry time. Schedule yourself around 15 minutes each day to do this, and set a timer, so that once the time is up, you make sure that you stop worrying until your worry time the following day. It may also help to write down your worries during this time.

Often people find that by the time their 'worry time' arrives, many of their worries may not matter any more. It is common to worry that you won't remember your worries during this time but if you forget them, it doesn't matter.

TIPS: Make sure you use this time ONLY to think about your worries. When the time is up, put the worries away and do something else.

LETTING GO OF WORRY

This is different from suppressing our worries. The aim isn't to force the worries out of our mind, but to gently let them go. We do this in four stages:

1 – Notice the worry

The first step is to notice the worries that you are experiencing, you may do this by saying to yourself something like “I have noticed a worry...”.

2 – Don't respond

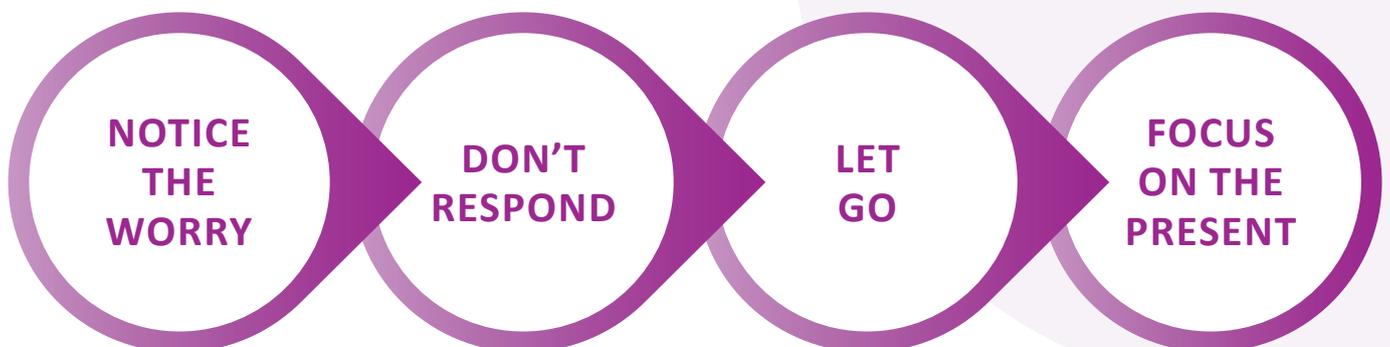
Normally we engage with our worries, we try to control them, challenge them or rationalise them in some way. Instead, try to just observe the worries, don't judge them, or react to them, merely notice that they are there.

3 – Let go

Once you have observed and recognised the worries, try to let them go. This is difficult to begin with, and sometimes a visual aide can help. Some people like to imagine their worries on clouds floating by, or leaves drifting down a stream gently. You may also find it helpful to say a statement to yourself, such as “My worries are not facts, they are just thoughts, they aren't helpful to me, so I'll just let them go.”

4 – Focus on the present

Once you have let the worries go, return your attention back to the present moment. Focus on your breathing, what small things are going on around you, what can you see, what can you feel?



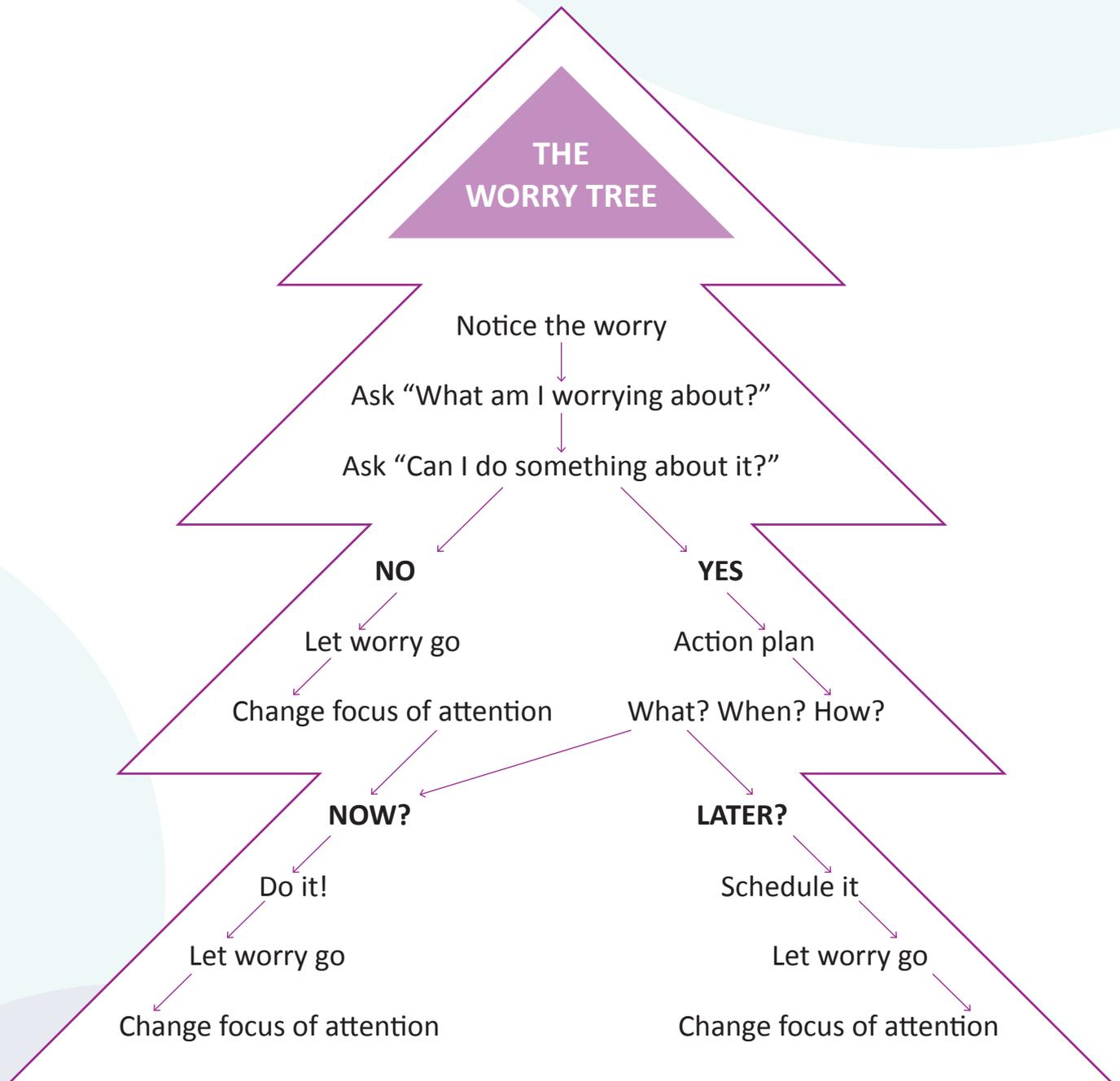
Often people find that when they are letting their worries go, their mind will wander back to the worrisome thoughts. This is ok! Just remind yourself that you are worrying, and gently bring your focus back to the present.

Again, don't judge yourself, or get annoyed, just gently bring yourself back. This can feel very strange and difficult to do at first, as when we worry or ruminate our minds are often in the future or the past, and not in the present.

Increasing your awareness, and focusing your attention to stop and take notice of what is going on in the present (something we don't do very often), can help your worries to pass by.

WORRY TREE

A Worry Tree⁽¹⁾ provides a structure for helping to think through your worries and the most helpful way to manage them. First, it is important to notice when you are worrying, and then question ‘What am I worrying about?’ and ‘Can I do something about it. If you can’t do anything, the focus will be to let the worry go. If something can be done, a more problem solving approach can be taken.



PROBLEM SOLVING

Sometimes our problems and difficulties can feel overwhelming, and we don't know how to deal with them. Problem solving is a logical process which makes these problems easier to manage by clearly defining the problem, breaking down larger difficulties into more manageable pieces and approaching each step one at a time.

TIP: Problem solving is different to worrying! Problem solving allows us to do something about our problems, rather than just thinking about them.

THE SEVEN STEPS OF PROBLEM SOLVING

- 1 Identify and clearly define the problem**
Decide on the current problem that needs solving, asking yourself, is this a clear and focussed problem? For example, "I cannot afford to pay my credit card bill".
- 2 Think up as many potential solutions as possible**
Think of as many possible solutions to your problem, even if they seem far-fetched – the more solutions you generate, the more likely it is that you will be able to solve your problem. Useful questions to ask yourself include "what advice would I give a friend?", "what have I done in similar situations in the past?", "what would my family / friends tell me to do?"
- 3 Weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of each solution**
Compare the good and bad points of each solution that you have identified in step 2.
- 4 Choose the best solution**
Pick the solution that is best for your current situation, this should be helpful and achievable.
- 5 Plan the steps to carry out the solution**
Think about what is needed to carry out the plan to solve your problem, and break it down into small steps. Try to ensure that your plan is a specific task that you can do, is realistic, clearly defines what you will do and when, and accommodates any possible obstacles.
- 6 Carry out your plan!**
- 7 Review the outcome**
Once you have carried out your plan, think about what was successful and what didn't work as well. It can be helpful to ask yourself the following questions: Was the solution successful? Did the solution solve my problem? Were there any disadvantages to this approach? If you didn't fully achieve your goal, it may be helpful to go back to steps 3 and 4 and choose another possible solution.

REFERENCE

(1) Adapted from Butler & Hope, 2007