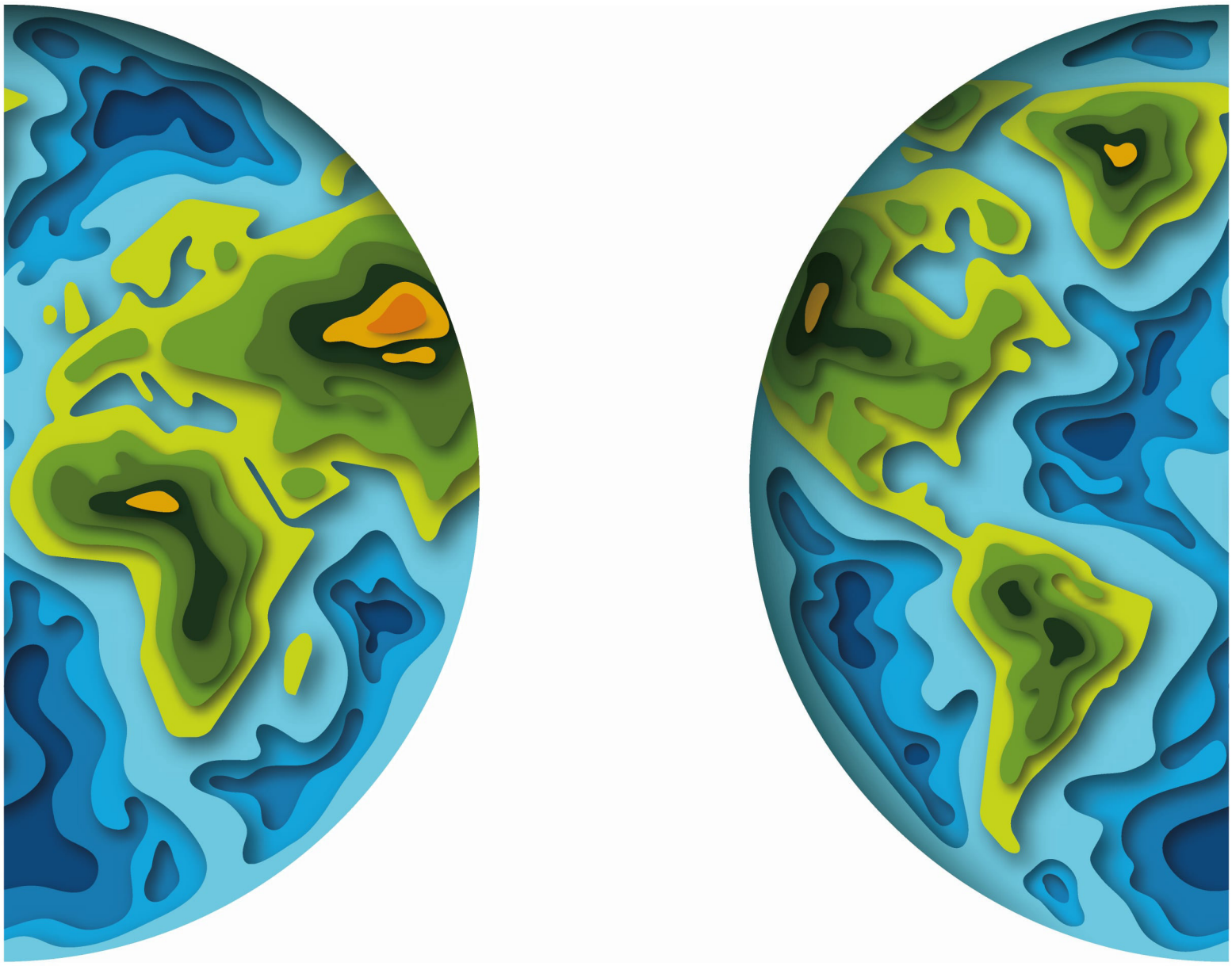
Guide
US English

Living with worry and anxiety amidst global uncertainty



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About this guide

Our world is changing rapidly at the moment. Given some of the news coverage, it would be hard not to worry about what it all means for yourself, and for those you love.

Worry and anxiety are common problems at the best of times, and when it takes over it can become all-encompassing. At Psychology Tools we have put together this free guide to help you to manage your worry and anxiety in these uncertain times.

Once you have read the information, feel free to try the exercises if you think they might be helpful to you. It's natural to struggle when times are uncertain, so remember to offer care and compassion to yourself, and to those around you.

Wishing you well,

Dr Matthew Whalley & Dr Hardeep Kaur

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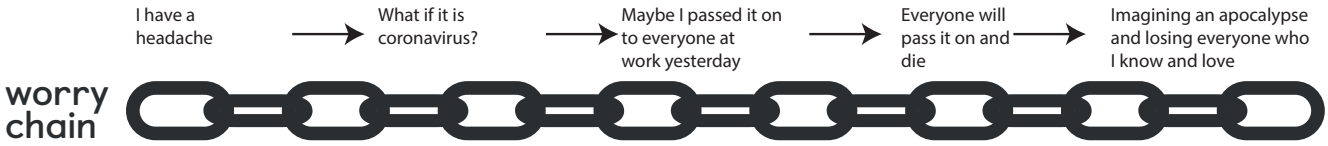
What is worry?

Human beings have the amazing ability to think about future events. 'Thinking ahead' means that we can anticipate obstacles or problems, and gives us the opportunity to plan solutions. When it helps us to achieve our goals, 'thinking ahead' can be helpful. For example, hand washing and social distancing are helpful things that we can decide to do in order to prevent the spread of the virus. However, worrying is a way of 'thinking ahead' that often leaves us feeling anxious or apprehensive. When we worry excessively, we often think about worst case scenarios and feel that we won't be able to cope.

What does worry feel like?

When we worry it can feel like a chain of thoughts and images, which can progress in increasingly catastrophic and unlikely directions. Some people experience worry as uncontrollable – it seems to take on a life of its own. It is natural that many of us may have recently noticed ourselves thinking about worst-case scenarios. The example below illustrates how worries can escalate quickly, even from something relatively minor. Have you noticed any thoughts like this? (confession: we both have!)



Worry isn't just in our heads. When it becomes excessive we feel it as anxiety in our bodies too. Physical symptoms of worry and anxiety include:

- Muscle tension or aches and pains.
- Restlessness and an inability to relax.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Feeling easily fatigued.

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What triggers worry and anxiety?

Anything can be a trigger for worry. Even when things go right, you might manage to think to yourself *"but what if it all falls apart?"*. There are particular situations where worry becomes even more common, though. Strong triggers for worry are situations that are:

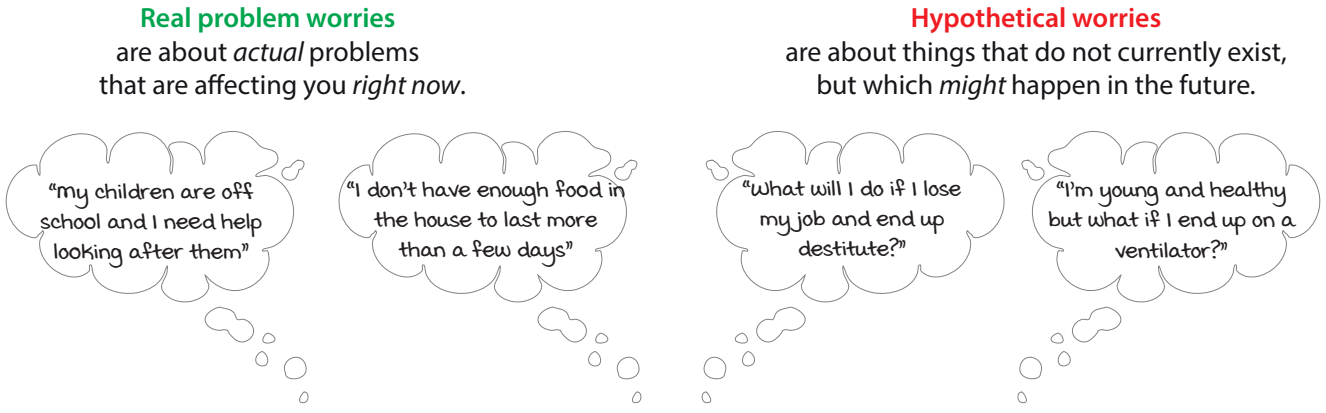
- **Ambiguous** – open to different interpretations.
- **Novel and new** – so we don't have any experience to fall back on.
- **Unpredictable** – unclear how things will turn out.

Does any of this sound familiar at the moment? The current worldwide health situation ticks all of these boxes, and so it makes sense that people are experiencing a lot of worry. It is an unusual situation with much uncertainty, which can naturally lead us to worry and feel anxious.

Are there different types of worry?

Worry can be helpful or unhelpful, and psychologists often distinguish between worries concerning 'real problems' vs. 'hypothetical problems'.

- **Real problem worries** are about actual problems that need solutions right now. For example, given the very real concern about the virus at the moment, there are helpful solutions which include regular handwashing, social distancing, and physical isolation if you have symptoms.
- **Hypothetical worries** about the current health crisis might include thinking about worst-case scenarios (what we might call catastrophizing). For example, imagining worst case scenarios such as *most* people dying.



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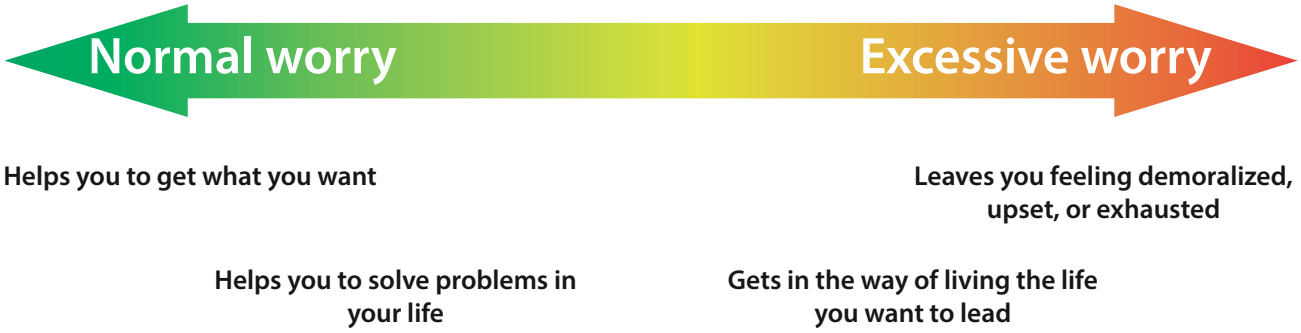
When does worry become a problem?

Everyone worries to some degree, and some thinking ahead can help us to plan and cope. There is no 'right' amount of worry. We say that worry becomes a problem when it stops you from living the life you want to live, or if it leaves you feeling demoralized and exhausted.



What can I do about worry?

It is natural for you to worry at the moment, but if you feel that it's becoming excessive and taking over your life – for example if it's making you anxious, or if you're stuggling to sleep – then it might be worth trying to find ways to limit the time you spend worrying, and taking steps to manage your well-being. In the next section of this guide we have included a selection of our favourite information handouts, exercises, and worksheets for maintaining well-being and managing worry. These can help you to:

- **Maintain balance in your life.** Psychologists think that well-being comes from living a life with a balance of activities that give you feelings of pleasure, achievement, and closeness. Our information handout *Look After Your Wellbeing By Finding Balance* discusses this in more detail. The *Activity Menu* on the following page contains suggestions of activities to help you to distract yourself and stay active. Remember that we're social animals – we need connections to thrive and flourish. We would recommend trying to do at least some activities that are social and involve other people. In times like these you might have to find some creative ways to do social things at a distance. For example, by keeping in touch online or by phone.
- **Practice identifying whether your worry is 'real problem' worry, or 'hypothetical worry'.** The *Worry Decision Tree* is a useful tool for helping you to decide what type your worry is. If you're experiencing lots of hypothetical worry, then it's important to remind yourself that your mind is not focusing on a problem that you can solve right now, and then to

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find ways to let the worry go and focus on something else. You might also use this tool with children if they are struggling to cope.

- **Practice postponing your worry.** Worry is insistent – it can make you feel as though you have to engage with it **right now**. But you can experiment with postponing hypothetical worry, and many people find that this allows them to have a different relationship with their worries. In practice, this means deliberately setting aside time each day to let yourself worry (e.g. 30 minutes at the end of each day). It can feel like an odd thing to do at first! It also means that for the other 23.5 hours in the day you try to let go of the worry until you get to your 'worry time'. Our *Worry Postponement* exercise will guide you through the steps you need to give it a try.

- **Speak to yourself with compassion.** Worry can come from a place of concern - we worry about others when we care for them. A traditional cognitive behavioral therapy technique for working with negative, anxious, or upsetting thoughts is to write them down and find a different way of responding to them. Using the *Challenging Your Thoughts With Compassion* worksheet, you can practice responding to your anxious or worrying thoughts with kindness and compassion. We have provided a worked example to get you started.

- **Practice mindfulness.** Learning and practicing mindfulness can help us to let go of worries and bring ourselves back to the present moment. For example focusing on the gentle movement of your breath or the sounds you hear around you, can serve as helpful 'anchors' to come back to the present moment and let go of worries.

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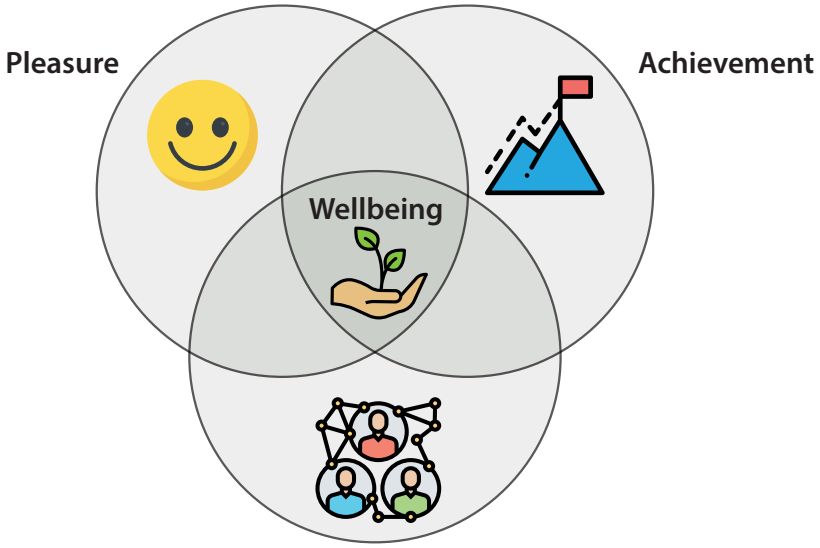
Look After Your Wellbeing By Finding Balance

With the current health situation many of our normal routines and daily activities are changing. Naturally this can be unsettling, and we can find that the things we usually did to look after our well-being have become difficult. Whether you are working from home, or in some form of physical isolation or distancing, it can be helpful to organise a daily routine that involves a balance between activities that:

- give you a sense of **achievement**,
- help you feel **close and connected** with others and
- activities that you can do just for **pleasure**.

When we are struggling with anxiety and worry, we can lose touch with things that used to give us pleasure. Plan to do some activities each day that are pleasurable and make you feel joyful. For example, reading a good book, watching a comedy, dancing or singing to your favourite songs, taking a relaxing bath, or eating your favourite food.

We feel good when we have achieved or accomplished something so it's helpful to include activities each day that give you a sense of achievement. For example, doing some housework, decorating, gardening, a work task, cooking a new recipe, completing an exercise routine, or completing 'life admin' such as paying a bill.



We are social animals so we need and naturally crave closeness and connection with other people. With the current health crisis many of us may be physically isolated or distant from others, so it's important that we consider creative ways to connect in order that we don't become socially isolated and lonely. How can you continue to connect with family and friends and have social time in a virtual way? Perhaps using social media, phone and video calls you could set up shared online activities e.g. a virtual book or film club. You could also explore local online neighbourhood groups, and see if there are ways to be involved in helping your local community.

An imbalance of pleasure, achievement, and closeness can affect our mood. For example if you spend most of your time working with no time for pleasure or socialising then you may start to feel low and isolated. Conversely, if you spend most of your time relaxing for pleasure and not doing other things that are important to you then this can also impact your mood.

At the end of each day could you check in with yourself and reflect on 'what did I do today that gave me a sense of achievement? Pleasure? Closeness with others?' Did I get a good balance, or what can I do differently tomorrow?

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Use An Activity Menu To Give You Some Ideas To Stay Occupied

Animals
Pet an animal
Walk a dog
Listen to the birds

Be active
Go for a walk
Go for a run
Go for a swim
Go cycling
Use an exercise video at home

Clean
Clean the house
Clean the yard
Clean the bathroom
Clean the toilet
Clean your bedroom
Clean the fridge
Clean the oven
Clean your shoes
Do the washing up
Fill / empty the dishwasher
Do laundry
Do some chores
Organise your workspace
Clean a cupboard

Connect with people
Contact a friend
Join a new group
Join a political party
Join a dating website
Send a message to a friend
Write a letter to a friend
Reconnect with an old friend

Cook
Cook a meal for yourself
Cook a meal for someone else
Bake a cake / cookies
Roast marshmallows
Find a new recipe

Create
Draw a picture
Paint a portrait
Take a photograph
Doodle / sketch
Organise photographs
Make a photograph album
Start a scrapbook
Finish a project
Do some sewing / knitting

Expression
Laugh
Cry
Sing
Shout
Scream

Kindness
Help a friend / neighbor / stranger
Make a gift for someone
Try a random act of kindness
Do someone a favour
Teach somebody a skill
Do something nice for someone
Plan a surprise for someone
Make a list of your good points
Make a list of things or people you are grateful for

Learn
Learn something new
Learn a new skill
Learn a new fact
Watch a tutorial video

Mend
Repair something in the house
Repair your bike / car / scooter
Make something new
Change a lightbulb
Decorate a room

Mind
Daydream
Meditate
Pray
Reflect
Think
Try relaxation exercises
Practise yoga

Music
Listen to music you like
Find some new music to listen to
Turn on the radio
Make some music
Sing a song
Play an instrument
Listen to a podcast

Nature
Try some gardening
Plant something
Do some pruning
Mow the lawn
Pick flowers
Buy flowers
Go for a walk in nature
Sit in the sun

Plan
Set a goal
Create a budget
Make a 5 year plan
Make a 'to do' list
Make a 'bucket list'
Make a shopping list

Read
Read a favourite book
Read a new book
Read the newspaper
Read your favourite website

Schedule
Get up extra early
Stay up late
Sleep in late
Tick something off your 'to do' list

Self care
Take a bath
Take a shower
Wash your hair
Give yourself a facial
Trim your nails
Sunbathe (wear sunscreen!)
Take a nap

Try something new
Try a new food
Listen to some new music
Watch a new TV show or movie
Wear some new clothes
Read a new book
Do something spontaneous
Express yourself

Watch
Watch a movie
Watch a TV show
Watch a YouTube video

Write
Write a letter with compliments
Write a letter to your politician
Write an angry letter
Write a grateful letter
Write a 'thank you' card
Write a journal / diary
Write your CV
Start writing a book

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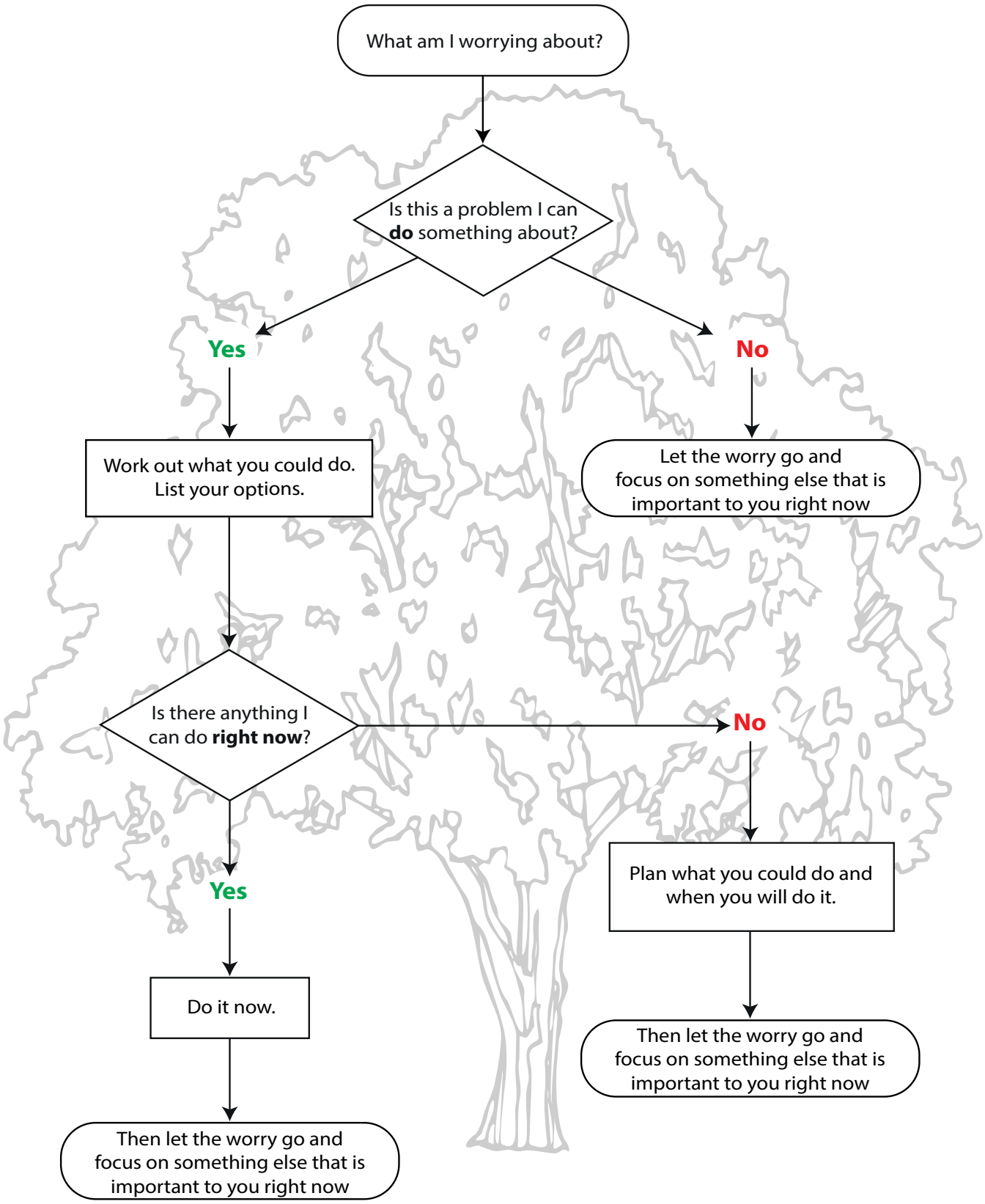
Use This Decision Tree To Help You Notice 'Real Problem' Vs. 'Hypothetical Worry'



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Worry Postponement For Uncertain Times

Psychologists think that there are two types of worry:

1. **Real problem worries** are about actual problems affecting you right now and which you can act on now.
   "My hands are dirty from gardening, I need to wash them", "I need to call my friend or she will think I have forgotten her birthday"
   "I can't find my keys", "I can't afford to pay this electricity bill", "My boyfriend isn't speaking to me".
2. **Hypothetical worries** are about things that do not currently exist, but which *might* happen in the future.
   "What if I die?", "What if everyone I know dies?", "Maybe this worrying is making me crazy"

People who are bothered by worry often experience it as *uncontrollable,* time consuming, and sometimes believe that it is beneficial to engage in worry when it occurs. Experimenting with postponing your worries – deliberately setting aside some time in your day to do nothing but worry and limiting the time you spend worrying – is a helpful way of exploring your relationship with worry. Follow the steps below for *at least* one week.

Step 1: Preparation

Decide **when** your worry time will be, and for **how long** it will be for.

- 'Worry time' is time you set aside every day for the specific purpose of worrying.
- What time of day do you think you will be in the best frame of mind to attend to your worries?
- When are you unlikely to be disturbed?
- If you are unsure, 15 to 30 minutes every day at 7:00pm is often a good starting point.

Step 2: Worry postponement

During the day, decide whether worries that surface are 'real problem' worries you can act on now, or whether they are hypothetical worries that need to be postponed.

Is this a *real problem worry* I can do something about right now?

Yes → **Take action now.**

No → **Postpone thinking about it until worry time.** → Redirect your attention to the present by becoming mindful of the present moment:

- use your senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste).
- try to focus your attention externally rather than internally.
- say to yourself "I'm not going to engage in this worry now, I will engage in this worry later".

Step 3: Worry time

Use your dedicated worry time for worrying. Consider writing down any of the hypothetical worries that you remember having had throughout the day. How concerning are they to you now? Are any of them the kinds of worries that can lead you to take practical actions?

- Try to use all of your allocated worry time, even if you do not feel that you have much to worry about, or even if worries do not seem as pressing at this time.
- Reflect upon your worries now – do they give you the same emotional 'kick' when you think about them now as they did when you first thought of them?
- Can any of your worries be converted into a practical problem to which you can look for a solution?

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Compassionate Thought Challenging Record

Situation Who were you with? What were you doing? Where were you? When did it happen?	**Emotions & body sensations** What did you feel? (Rate intensity 0–100%)	**Automatic thought** What went through your mind? (Thoughts, images, or memories)	**Compassionate response** What would a truly self-compassionate response be to your negative thought?
Watching the news for the second hour in a row.	Feelings of anxiety and an increasing sensation of panic.	This is terrible. So many people could die. What's going to happen to me and my family? If you had an image or memory, what did it mean to you?	It's understandable that you're worried – it would be unusual not to be. What's the best thing that you can do for yourself to feel better right now? Maybe you could watch a comedy instead of the news, or get up and do something else. Try to respond to yourself with the compassionate qualities of wisdom, strength, warmth, kindness, and non-judgement • What would my best friend say to me? • What would a truly compassionate being say to me? • What tone of voice would I need to be talked to in order to feel reassured?

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Some final tips

- **Set a routine.** If you are spending more time at home it is important to continue with a regular routine. Maintain a regular time for waking up and going to bed, eating at regular times, and getting ready and dressed each morning. You could use a timetable to give structure to your day.
- **Stay mentally and physically active.** When you plan your daily timetable have a go at including activities that keep both your mind and body active. For example, you could try learning something new with an online course, or challenge yourself to learn a new language. It's also important to keep physically active. For example doing rigorous housework for 30 minutes, or an online exercise video.
- **Practice gratitude.** At times of uncertainty, developing a gratitude practice can help you to connect with moments of joy, aliveness, and pleasure. At the end of each day take time to reflect on what you are thankful for today. Try and be specific and notice new things each day, for example 'I am grateful that it was sunny at lunchtime so I could sit in the garden'. You could start a gratitude journal, or keep notes in a gratitude jar. Encourage other people in your home to get involved too.
- **Notice and limit worry triggers.** As the health situation develops it can feel like we need to constantly follow the news or check social media for updates. However, you might notice this also triggers your worry and anxiety. Try to notice what triggers your worry. For example, is it watching the news for more than 30 minutes? Checking social media every hour? Try to limit the time that you are exposed to worry triggers each day. You might choose to listen to the news at a set time each day, or you could limit the amount of time you spend on social media for news checking.
- **Rely on reputable news sources.** It can also help to be mindful of where you are obtaining news and information. Be careful to choose reputable sources. The World Health Organization provides excellent information here:
  `https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public`

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