

Worry: More Dangerous To Your Health Than You May Realize

from the American Counseling Association

Most of us find plenty of opportunities in daily life to worry. From work problems to family issues to our health, we all have an endless list of things that can cause worry.

But worrying about real things in our lives isn't always bad, though perhaps not very enjoyable. Being worried performs a needed function, getting us to focus on an issue and, hopefully, to take action.

The problem is needless worry. That's worry about things that are imaginary or out of our control. Such worry is harmful as it raises stress levels, yet comes from things we can do nothing about.

Excessive worry is not only unpleasant and stressful, but can lead to very real health issues. Worrying stimulates our bodies to produce various chemicals, such as adrenaline, that cause physiological reactions, such as muscle tension, increased blood pressure and higher heart rates.

The physical reaction to constant worry can result in headaches, back pain and stomach problems. There's evidence it also affects our immune system, leaving us more vulnerable to viruses and bacteria, perhaps even cancer, and appears to increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.

So how to reduce worry in your life? Start by analyzing how real the source of your worrying is. If it's something over which you have control, then channel your worry into action. Develop a plan for dealing with the cause of your worry, then carry it out.

But if your source of worry is outside your control, it will continue to cause you emotional and physical problems without allowing you a way to deal with the problem.

Your goal is to stop such needless worry before it takes control of your emotions. One way is to re-channel your thoughts. A simple diversion, such as music, a book, talking to a friend or getting some exercise, can often help. It takes practice to refocus your thoughts away from needless worry, but it can be done.

Once the worry is under control, think about how real the source of that worry is and whether it's something you might better ignore, rather than letting it control you.

If you find that chronic worry, especially over things you can't control or influence, is negatively affecting your life, consider talking to a professional counselor who can offer a variety of ways to help reduce the non-productive sources of stress.

Counseling Corner is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org

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