

Think Tank: Worry less, enjoy more

Presenter – Amy Hopkins, Clinical Writer and Liason

Amy Hopkins:

Everybody worries. It's a normal part of life. But when we get stuck in worry, it makes it more difficult to enjoy our lives. Today, Emily and Narciso join me on the podcast to discuss worry, and ways we can manage it. I'm so happy you're here. Welcome to the Think Tank podcast.

Hey, Emily and Narciso, are you ready to tackle all of your worries today?

Emily Lockamy:

As ready as I'll ever be, Amy! This is one of my favorite topics, because I'm very familiar with worrying.

Narciso Bowman:

I'm definitely ready today. I'm an over-thinker, so I'm ready to overthink a lot less.

Amy Hopkins:

Oh, me too. I am a huge over-thinker, and I think that is definitely what we're talking about with worry. But let's start off by clarifying what worry is. Worry is really when you have this troublesome thought that just sneaks into your brain about a current problem, or something potentially that could happen down the road in the future. It's when our brains dwell on something or stew on something. And I think it's important, right off the bat, that we normalize that this is not a bad thing. This is completely normal, we all worry, it's part of the way that our brains function to protect us from real, or imagined, or potential threats. But because we want to feel in control, we want to feel like we have some kind of ability to manage things that come into our lives, so worry is completely normal. So, let's talk about ways that we can manage this completely human emotion that we all have. One thing that is recommended that you can do to help with worry is to set aside a time during the day that you give yourself to focus on your worries.

Emily Lockamy:

I love that one, Amy. Yeah, this practice has helped me, and I've seen it help a lot of other people as well. So, it's when you have a worry come up, you acknowledge it, maybe even write it down, but you tell yourself you're not going to engage in worrying right now; you will address it

during a specific time, during your worry time, you could call it. And then during your worry time, that time you set aside, the first thing you want to identify is, is your worry something you can do something about? Is it helpful or not? Is it productive or unproductive? Is it within your control? What's the root of the worry? And if the worry is something that's within your control, you can make a plan of how you're going to get it done, what you're going to do about it.

Narciso Bowman:

That's a really great point you made, Emily. I think a piece that I always think about when it comes to worrying is, is the worry really worth it? Is the stress really worth it? Is it productive to worry about it? Is it productive to stress about it, or is it unproductive? I think that's a huge piece. When we do think about things, are they really worth the worry?

Emily Lockamy:

Yeah, I completely agree, Narciso, I like the way you put that. And the thing about worry is that it can become habitual, and the more we worry, the more that's what we will revert to. And worrying can make us feel like we're doing something. It can make us feel like we are keeping ourselves safe from this anticipated threat. But the thing is, unless there's something you can do about it, unless there's something productive you can do, unless you can problem solve, then you are really just spiraling, a lot of the time. And also anxiety can be worse or worrying can become more problematic when you are just trying constantly to control it, too, like when you say, "I've got to stop this worry", or you're judging your worry, or you're avoiding things because you're so worried. All of these things are reinforcing the worry.

Narciso Bowman:

So, before we move further in this conversation, I really just wanted to drop a quote that speaks on mindfulness, about worrying and overthinking processes. And it's by Maya Angelou, she states: "We spend precious hours fearing the inevitable. It would be wise to use that time adoring our families, cherishing our friends, and living our lives."

Amy Hopkins:

Oh, there's nothing better than a Maya Angelou quote. She's everything. And that says it all, doesn't it? Really, you've got to look at the worry, and you've got to look at what it costs you. Again, is it just costing you precious time? Is it costing you precious energy? Is it taking away from things that you love and people that you love? And again, I think it goes back to, is it within my control or is it outside of my control? Is it helpful, is it not?

So, I want to give an example of a helpful worry, because I want to make sure that we are going back to that worry is not a bad emotion. There are no bad emotions. And if we ignore worry, if we try to just squash it and pretend like it's not there, we just make it worse. So, we've got to address the worries as they come up. But worry, again, can be very helpful, because when it is something within our control, we can create and take the time to problem solve it, to come up with solutions.

For example, if I have a worry that I'm not going to be able to pay my rent at the end of the month, so it is a real concern. And so you can sit down and you look at your finances, and you can decide what you need to adjust, and maybe what you need to cut back on, and make a plan for how you are going to manage the end of the month, when the rent comes due. So, that is a helpful worry, because it gives you the motivation, the inclination to sit down and focus on what you can control.

The worry that is troublesome is when it's something outside of our control that we get focused on that, again, takes away from the precious time, the precious moments that we have. And that is where I think we've got to come up with solutions to manage that kind of worry.

Emily Lockamy:

Yeah, and I think, too, it can become problematic when the worries are irrational, and when they're just coming up all the time for you, and it's interfering with your ability to function and your daily life, and the worries are becoming generalized, and you're worrying about all these different areas, all these different things all the time. And there are tools that you can use if that applies to you. There are different coping strategies that you can use that really can help with managing that worry and, over time, reducing time spent worrying. And one of those that I wanted to mention is sharing your worries with someone, like a supportive friend, a family member, or even a professional therapist.

Amy Hopkins:

And I love that you said supportive friend, like somebody who can say, "Look, Amy, I know that you're worried about this, but what's the likelihood that that's going to happen?" Or, "What if it did happen? What would you do? You could manage, you've managed things before." But somebody who really can address, maybe, those irrational ideas and thoughts. So, it does need to be somebody that supportive, like a therapist or a close friend or family member, that can help you work through the worry, work through those irrational thoughts that you might be having.

Another thing, and I know we talk about this a lot too, is just mindfulness. And mindfulness is not just about sitting quietly in the moment and doing your breathing. It is, it's great. That's

definitely something that can help with worry and worrying. It is like what Narciso said before, just enjoying the moment. And that kind of goes back to the making time for worry. I'm going to set my worry time at seven o'clock at night. And so when you have a worrisome thought come up and you say, "Yep, not right now. I'm going to live in the moment right now, and I'll think about you at seven o'clock." It really is just like it's not ignoring the worry, it's just saying, "I'm going to give you time and space later, but right now, I'm going to enjoy my family, I'm going to enjoy my work, I'm going to enjoy..." Whatever it is that you're doing at the time.

Narciso Bowman:

Yeah, sometimes you got to put that worry to the side.

Emily Lockamy:

Yeah. And you mentioned mindfulness, Amy, and I think mindfulness is such an important practice and skill, and it's all about being aware of your thoughts, your feelings, your bodily sensations, but without judgment. And I think that that's such a key here, is to practice not judging yourself and your feelings as they come up, because you can't really cope through the feeling until you accept that it's there in the first place.

Another strategy that can help is investigating the root of your worry, peeling back the layers. What are you really afraid of here? Is this worry fueled by a faulty thought, or a core belief, such as, "Bad things always happen to me" or, "The worst case scenarios always come true"? And then you can work on challenging those thoughts, and looking for the evidence for those thoughts. And this is a process that is part of CBT, cognitive behavioral therapy, that can be incredibly helpful for worries and anxieties.

Amy Hopkins:

And part of that, I think, is reframing the worry, right? You're looking at it and you're saying, "Okay, what is the likelihood that this is going to come true? And what if it did come true? What would I do? What could I plan for? What can I..." Whatever. But you can also look back and you can say, "I've been through tough times before. I've been through tough situations before. What did I do? How did I cope? What can I rely on for future events?" So, instead of looking at it like this catastrophic thing that definitely is going to happen, you look at it and you kind of peel it apart and say, "Could it happen? Has it happened? What if it did happen?" And then plan out the ways that you would cope with that, or the ways you have coped with that.

Narciso Bowman:

I think another piece that goes with that is also just setting the expectations of yourself. So, you're setting up the expectations to deal with what's coming. Because if you set up those expectations of yourself and you know, like you were saying, Amy, if this is going to happen, what is the likelihood of this happening? You could also take that and say, "If it does happen, how would I handle it? How will I handle it? How can I handle it? What can I put forth? How much effort, how much capacity do I have to put into this right now to handle whatever percent of this that's occurring? On a scale of one to 10, if it's a five, what can I put forth now to handle that worry of a five that I have?" And I think that's also a big piece of it, is you look at what it is, you understand what it is, now you set the expectations of yourself as, "What am I going to do to handle it or to deal with it right now?"

Emily Lockamy:

Those are such good points, and how we handle things, that is one of the only things we have control over, right? There is so much that's outside our control, and so learning to tolerate uncertainty, I think, too, is another skill that is important to learn and work on. And then reminding ourselves of the things we do have influence over, how we respond, our choices that we make, our actions, that's what we can do.

Narciso Bowman:

I have a prime example of this actually that just happened yesterday. My daughter just started at a new school, and she doesn't like it as much as her old school, because she filtered in with kids that she was in elementary school with to middle school, and now she's at a new school, so she doesn't know anyone. And she stated some things she didn't like about the school. And so I stopped her and I said, "Hey, how much of that is within your control?" And I said, "The main thing you need to focus on is yourself. Focus on what you can control. There's things that have absolutely nothing to do with you. There's things that, if other students have an issue with, that's their problem to have, but not yours. You're new here. You take things for what they are and you adapt, you adjust, and you control what you can control."

And I think that's a very healthy piece of it all, is to tell someone not to worry as much about everything else, but more so what they can control. Because worrying about things that you can't really control is pretty scary, because it's a vast amount of things we can't control. So, worrying about those things, it's definitely not healthy for anyone. But telling a 12-year-old, that is a bit more difficult, because of the age and the way their brains are set up at 12 years old. But as an adult, I have to tell myself that all the time. If something goes wrong, I have to look at what I can control, and how I can make the situation better, while still sometimes being nervous about whatever else is going on. You help that by taking care of what you can handle. You lessen the load just a little bit.

Amy Hopkins:

Yeah, and good job, Dad. Absolutely, good job. Because I think what you did is you validated, "Yeah, this is hard. This is hard, being in a new school and dealing with all of that, but you have no control about what people say or think or do. But what you do have control over is what you say and do." And I think that that's good advice for all of us. And so as long as we're on quotes, I have one of these quotes that I love, and it's by Ann Landers, and she said, "At age 20, we worry about what others think of us. At age 40, we don't care what they think of us. At age 60, we discover they haven't been thinking about us at all." So, you could change that to, "Age 12, we worry about what other people think of us." But really, it's true.

It's like if we really got down to... Emily, earlier you talked about getting to the root of what we're worried about, and the root of what I hear, in even my teenagers and kids, is like, "I'm not going to fit in. They're not going to like me. They're not going to do this. They're not going to do that." That's a genuine worry. The only control that you have, and the only control that they have in that situation, is to be their authentic self, show who they are, be vulnerable, which is terrifying, especially at 12 and 18, and however old we all are. It's tough-

Emily Lockamy:

Yeah.

Amy Hopkins:

... being vulnerable. But really, that's all you can do, is show up, and monitor what you think and how you behave, and the rest will either fall into place or it won't. But I love that. And again, she's lucky that you were able to be there for her, and be able to talk to her about that, just to really point the focus back to what she has control over in that new school.

Emily Lockamy:

So, when you're dealing with worries, a good thing to do is to set aside some time, figure out if this is a rational worry you're having, figure out whether this is something you can actually do anything about, or if this is unproductive, your worry. And then implement tools that can help, such as mindfulness techniques, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, talking to somebody who is supportive. Even writing down your worries can help, putting those worries onto paper. Especially at night, if worries are keeping you from falling asleep or waking you up, jotting them down on a piece of paper can help release it from your mind so that you can sleep. And also it's important to understand that different things work for different people, so it's important to find what works best for you.

Narciso Bowman:

I think all of those are great ways to deal and to practice dealing with worry, and trying to work your way through it.

Amy Hopkins:

I completely agree. And again, worrying is a part of life for all of us. It's completely normal, it's how our brains protect ourselves. It is important that we accept our worries without judgment, and that we learn ways to cope with worry. But when we are worrying too much, when we're worrying all of the time, and it's impacting our daily lives and the way we move about the world, that's when we need to take it a step further and maybe do some additional things to address it, because it can really affect your physical and your mental health, when you are having excessive worry.

Narciso Bowman:

Yeah, that's a great point, Amy. And in terms of physical issues, worry can cause things such as sleepless nights, even exhaustion. It can cause your blood pressure to increase. It can even go as far as stomach issues, discomfort and problems, which none of us like. It can cause restlessness, it can cause headaches. Even things such as tension. These are things that we don't want to have on a daily basis happening to us based off of worrying. That's something heavy to think about, how worrying can cause these types of issues on your physical being.

Emily Lockamy:

Definitely. It can take such a toll. And when worrying is excessive, it can lead you to avoid things, and miss out on living as full a life as you want to. So, its impact can be far-reaching. Chronic worrying can also lead to or contribute to things like trouble making decisions, trouble concentrating, difficulty regulating your emotions, memory issues. And this can impact you socially as well. You may be avoiding things because you're anxious and worried about them, and that can lead to you missing out on activities and experiences with people. It can lead to you not being able to live as full a life as you want to.

Amy Hopkins:

So, if you're worrying a lot, excessively, all the time, it may be something more serious, something like an anxiety disorder, and that is something that you're going to want to get professional help for. So again, if it's interfering with your daily life, your work, it's causing you distress in your relationships, if you're having those physical or emotional side effects that Narciso and Emily talked about, if you're having trouble sleeping, or you're having physical

symptoms because of your worry, it's really time to reach out and get some help, because no one should have to worry alone.

When we have worries about something we have control over, it can be healthy. It can push us to find solutions to whatever issue we're facing. But when it's something outside of our control, we can also find ways to learn how to let it go, to not give it much space and time in our lives. And when we worry less, we enjoy our lives more. Thanks for being here. We'll see you next time on the Think Tank podcast.

Narciso Bowman:

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