

RELEASE WORRY

It usually does little good to walk up to a stressed-out person and say, “Worried? There’s no need. Just relax!” Often people want something more concrete.

The strategies listed below are places to start, especially when you deal with worry, the mental component of distress.

Let go of stressful self-talk

There’s a conversation that goes on 24 hours each day and exerts a major influence on how we feel and behave. That conversation is the one inside our heads—the constant stream of words and images that our brains manufacture, even while we sleep.

When we’re distressed, that stream cranks into high gear and starts looking and sounding like a low-budget horror movie. Thoughts such as *This is terrible* or *This is the worst thing that could ever happen to me* are accompanied by mental pictures of impending disaster. At these moments, we focus on the worst outcomes that could possibly happen.

Worry, goes the old saying, is a down payment on a debt we may never have to pay. Most of the catastrophic scenes we picture never come to pass. This offers a resounding argument for letting go of those pictures immediately.

Be rational

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), developed by Albert Ellis, offers a specific way to manage self-talk. Ellis bases this therapy on what he calls the ABC’s of human emotion and behavior.

“A” stands for an activating event, such as getting fired or being diagnosed with a serious illness. “C” stands for the emotional consequences assumed to be caused by the activating event. Those consequences might include feeling depressed or getting angry.

Ellis claims that “A” does not directly result in “C.” Instead, “B”—our belief about an activating event—is the real source of our emotional reaction.

Any belief can be rational or irrational. Rational beliefs lead to healthy responses that help us reach our goals. Irrational beliefs lead to unhealthy, distressful responses that block us from getting what we want in the long run.

Ellis points to three irrational beliefs in particular that can instantly undercut our happiness:

- Other people must always do exactly what we want them to do.
- Events must always turn out exactly as we want them to.
- We must never disappoint ourselves or act contrary to our expectations.

Good news: We can start to turn our internal conversations around by replacing these beliefs with beliefs that are more rational:



- Other people may or not act the way we want them to. We don't have to invest our well-being in their behavior.
- Sometimes, despite our best efforts, events will turn out in ways that we don't like. We don't have to invest our well-being in how things turn out.
- We are likely to make mistakes now and then. We don't have to invest our well-being in being perfect.

Thinking rationally can change depression into mere disappointment and can upgrade debilitating devastation into manageable annoyance. By managing our beliefs about an activating event, we can reduce our levels of distress and respond to any circumstance in ways that help us get more of what we want.

Write about it

One way to manage distress is to simply become aware of what our minds are doing. Writing in journals—getting the conversation out of our heads and onto paper—is one way to defuse negative thoughts. When we translate our thoughts into words that sit right in front of us, it's easier to dispute irrational beliefs and replace them with more empowering thoughts.

Since the hand is slower than the mind, attempting to describe our distress on paper really puts the brakes on our thoughts. In addition, writing is a way to gain perspective. When our stressful thoughts are sitting obediently on a piece of paper, they often seem less forbidding.

Yell “Stop!” and fantasize

Thoughts can race faster than a speeding bullet. Sometimes a simple and dramatic way to calm a torrent of self-defeating thoughts is to give a direct order. Just yell “Stop!”

When appropriate, do this literally—yell the word out loud. If that's not wise, then do it mentally or just move your lips without making a sound.

Either way, notice what happens to your thoughts. An unusual response like this one can be just what you need to derail an unwelcome and stress-producing train of thought.

Once the self-defeating thoughts stop or slow down, you can replace them with ones that are more pleasant and empowering.

For example, make a list of the ten most pleasant experiences you can imagine. Picture yourself walking barefoot on the beach on a mild summer day, or being with someone you love. Once you have put a halt to your stressful thoughts, then bring out your list and focus on one of the items.

Or instead of imagining how terribly things might turn out, take a few minutes to mentally rehearse success. Picture yourself sailing through IRS audits, work evaluations, or any other events you normally dread. Anticipating success can increase the chance that it will happen.



Zoom out

When you're in the middle of a situation and feel distressed, take a trip. You don't have to physically leave the scene; just do the traveling in your head.

Imagine that you're floating to the ceiling and looking down on the stressful situation as an outside, detached observer. If you want, let your imagination soar even farther. See yourself rising above the scene so that your whole community, city, nation, or planet is within view. From this larger perspective, ask yourself whether the situation is worth worrying about.

Another option is to zoom out in time. Imagine yourself one week, one month, one year, one decade, or even one century from today. Assess how important the current situation will seem to you when that time comes.

Recognize limits

Being a perfectionist means taking virtues, such as attention to detail and a passion for quality, to an extreme. Much distress results when we set ourselves up for failure by having expectations that are too high. The most powerful goals are those that both stretch us *and* engage us in a task we can actually accomplish—goals that are both high and realistic.

Talk about it

Finding a sympathetic ear can work wonders when we're distressed. Talking to a friend, family member, or counselor can be powerful. Unburdening our woes to a pet or even a plant might sound weird, but it can't hurt either.

If we're desperate, bereft of friends, or low on cash, we can remember that almost every major city offers toll-free hot lines for people in crisis to call. Through hot lines, we can gain immediate access to free counseling or an understanding listener. Ministers and community mental health centers can be powerful options, too. With all these resources, there's no reason to experience our pain alone, in silence.

Focus on today

This is a strategy well known to members of 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous. To a person recovering from alcoholism, the thought of a lifetime without alcohol can trigger feelings of despair. The thought of just getting through the next 24 hours without it seems a little more manageable.

We can apply the same strategy to any behavior or attitude we want to maintain or eliminate—take it one day at a time. Exercise just for today. Substitute fruit juice for dessert just for today. Postpone buying that luxury item just for today. Don't worry about how you're going to sustain a change for the rest of your life. Just focus on the next 24 hours.

Caution: Like any other strategy, this one can be misused. Some people use the idea of "one day at a time" to prolong an unacceptable situation. In harmful situations—such as an abusive relationship—we might resign ourselves to tolerating just one more day of suffering or humiliation.



The problem comes when that “one more day” turns into weeks, months, and years.

The question we can ask when we find ourselves afraid to change, day after day, is *If not now, when?* Sometimes it takes a great deal of courage to change today. Telling the truth, finding support from others, and choosing to make a specific change can be the first steps toward more happiness.

Postpone worry

If you like to procrastinate, here’s one situation in which this ability comes in handy. Instead of worrying now, put it off. Schedule a time to worry later, or tell yourself you’ll get around to it if you feel like it. For now, give yourself permission to enjoy some peace of mind.

When we apply this strategy, a joyous discovery awaits us: Much of the time, the things we worry about never come to pass. By postponing worry, we save ourselves needless mental wear and tear.

Worry it to death

Sometimes we can manage distress by exaggerating the normal tendencies of a racing mind. If our minds want to imagine the worst, then we can let them. The trick is to be sure that we take this line of thought to the extreme of absurdity.

Example: “If I don’t get this job, first I’ll run out of money, then I’ll have to go live with my parents, then everyone will laugh at me, then my parents will kick me out, then I’ll be homeless and live in a cardboard box on the street, then I’ll starve or freeze to death.”

Once we imagine the very worst, we can backtrack and usually picture a more realistic possibility. Then we can start to devise workable plans that help us alleviate distress.

This is not a suggestion to ignore our problems. It is a suggestion to find a reasonable level of concern. When we’ve discovered that level, we can state the problem objectively and discover solutions.

Do something constructive

It’s easy to live in our minds, trying to figure out why we feel the way we do. We can get so focused on ourselves that we become self-centered, forgetting that the outside world even exists.

Sometimes a simple change in our focus is all that’s needed to lower distress. Instead of endlessly probing our own psyche, we can take an active interest in the world around us. We can shift our attention from *What am I feeling?* to *What needs doing?* This might lead us to vacuuming the living room, apologizing to a friend, or doing volunteer work. Upset has little room to maneuver when our attention is focused on accomplishing a task.

If this sounds like a suggestion to get distracted—well, it is. Distraction can be useful, especially when we’ve been mired in a problem for days or weeks and no solution is in sight. The change of pace that comes with



refocusing our attention can actually give us a fresh perspective on the difficulty.

This is not a suggestion to ignore or repress feelings. The point is to do something constructive *and* feel the feeling. While remaining fully in touch with an emotion, we can move into action.

Say no

Much of our distress results from our fear of a two-letter word—no. Uttering this simple word can work miracles. It can banish projects from our lives that serve no real purpose or that push us into overload. Most of the time, people will appreciate the honesty in a statement such as “My plate is full, and taking on one more task is more than I can handle.”

Set priorities

When we try to cram ten hours’ worth of activities into eight hours, we start out the day already two hours behind.

We can stop this form of self-sabotage by asking some questions:

What’s my top priority for today? What’s the worst that could happen if this didn’t get done? If I could only get three things done today, what would I want them to be? What activities are most in line with my purposes and values?

The answers we get can help us separate the wheat from the chaff in our daily schedule.

Delegate

Often we can benefit by tackling only the projects that are uniquely suited to our own abilities. The other tasks we can handle in no time by giving them to someone else.

Coach yourself

When faced with a problem in your life, first put it into words. Describe the problem while talking out loud or by putting it in writing. Define the problem as carefully as you can.

Then pretend that someone else is having this problem—someone you care about deeply—and write down several suggestions for this person. Afterward, step back and ask if any of these suggestions might work for you. This is one way to start being your own coach.

Let the feeling pass

Feelings are dynamic, constantly in a state of flux. And they come in waves—a crest is always followed by a fall. What feels most intense at one moment can subside in the next. When all else fails, we can count on one thing: Our feelings are going to change.

When we accept our feelings—both pleasant and unpleasant—and allow them to pass, we climb off the emotional roller coaster. We can enjoy the highs without getting attached to them. And we can last through the lows without feeling trapped by them. In either case, we can rest on the flow of feelings, enjoying their richness and variety.

Ask for help

There are over six billion people on this planet. All of them are potential allies in creating the life of our dreams.

Distress multiplies needlessly when we try to solve problems alone. When other people know about the distress we feel, many are willing to lend a hand. Often the first thing they say is “How can I help?” Taking them up on the proposition is one way to defuse distress.

This is an obvious solution, and many people rule it out. They abide by some unworkable ideas, such as:

“It’s a sign of weakness to ask for help.”

“Other people aren’t interested in my problems.”

“They can’t really help.”

“They wouldn’t help, even if they could.”

We can release these thoughts before they compromise our happiness. The alternative is simple: Ask for help.

