

Bob Gunn, Editor

How to Stop Worrying

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

“I remember you saying that ‘worry’ was one of your primary emotions for a very long time,” a colleague recently said to Bob. “Can you write me your pithy version of how you overcame the habit?”

Worry is definitely something that a lot of us are, well, worried about. Recent studies are adding to concerns that negative thoughts can have serious physiological effects. “You are what you eat, but you are also what you think,” Dr. Daniel Amen, author of several books, including the new *Making a Good Brain Great*, told *Newsweek* (October 24, 2005). “Every time you have a thought, your brain releases chemicals. When you have good thoughts, happy thoughts, it’s a completely different set of chemicals than when you’re feeling angry or hopeless.”

Worry is a deluge of repeated thoughts. The first pops into mind, we dwell on it, and pretty soon there’s no room for anything other than concern or apprehension. It’s impossible to “control” our thinking in that nothing can stop that first worried thought. But we do have free will—the ability to choose whether we chase that first one with

another, and another, and another.

Bob was a world-class worrier. Optimistic by nature, he even worried that his optimism was worth fretting about. Worry seemed a faithful servant protecting him from mistakes, peril, and unforeseen events. Over a lifetime, these habits had become a core part of his personality, obvious to everyone. Like water coursing downhill, anxiety had carved deep channels in his very core. Worry was part of his character.

Then one day, a person close to him asked, “How are things going in the business?” Bob responded, “Great! Why?”

“Well,” said his friend, “people seem concerned that something is

wrong. They are deeply worried—do you think the staff is picking that up from you?”

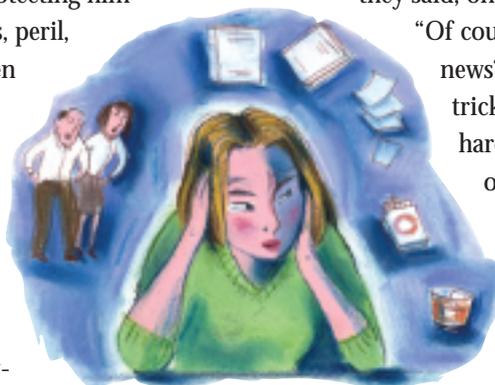
Bob was flabbergasted. Worry had become such a normal, familiar thought pattern, a part of his daily living, that he no longer noticed the feeling, much less imagined that others might be affected by his mood.

Skeptical, he started asking members of the firm whether or not they felt he was a worrywart. To a person they said, one way or another,

“Of course! What, this is news?” One of life’s tricks is to make it hard for us to observe our behaviors in action. That’s why watching ourselves on tape can be so hard—“Who is that person?” we

think as we watch the video.

Bob began observing how others responded to him—at home, with friends. And he saw his worry reflected in what they would say to him. His son was accustomed to saying “Oh, don’t worry so much Dad. Everything will work out,” two or three times a day. Or his wife would say, “Honey,



stop being so anxious. I'm sure it will turn out just fine."

That was the proof he needed, and he made up his mind to do something about it.

Over the course of six months, Bob stopped worrying. Here is what worked for him.

1. Zero in on the feeling associated with the thought habit of worry.

For Bob, it felt like walking through deep mud, chewing a cud until his jaw ached, or being stuck in a snowdrift and just rocking the car back and forth. The emotional link gave him feedback about how much time he spent anxious—he was shocked to discover that it was 90% of the typical day.

2. Catch yourself feeling that way in the moment. When he first started, he noticed worry only when he reflected on the day's events as he was going to bed. As he practiced looking within for the feeling, he next became aware of "worry" just after the fact—as soon as there was a break in the action. Within a couple of months, he discovered he could catch himself worrying as he was actually doing it. Then, rather than continue feeding the thinking habit by dwelling on it, Bob made an effort to turn his back, point his mind in another direction, and wait for something else to come to mind.

3. Step back mentally and observe yourself. He became an observer of "Bob," of that personality from a deeper state of awareness. He could watch "himself" from a calm state of mind since he was no longer feeding his agitation. Joy and hope began to accompany worry as, just by noticing the feeling, he felt the power to choose if he were going to mindlessly dwell on worried thoughts.

4. Go deep. The freedom to step back, the joy of knowing he could

act on free will, led to many insights. Bob wasn't analyzing, just noticing when a fresh observation bubbled up. For example, TV presented so many anxious story lines that simply not watching reduced "worry episodes." A deeper realization was how apprehensive his mother was and that he must have gotten a steady diet of worry as a youngster.

5. Make a commitment to change—this takes willpower! Sometimes you must also overcome a lot of mental bull—the false assumption that worry serves a useful purpose. It may be pointing out something requiring our attention—but not when you are merely indulging ego of "the whole world rests on my shoulders" variety.

6. Be prepared to have your ego fight back. By ego we mean the thoughts that are bundled into our identity called "me." Bob identified himself as a worrier. Sometimes he felt that something was literally gripping his brain and forcing him to worry against his will. At other times, he felt that he was being seduced—his ego would whisper how important, even helpful, worry was or how comfortable it felt to construct a virtual world by mulling events and possibilities over and over.

7. Transcend your ego, personality, conditioning, habits, etc., so that you spend more and more of your time operating from awareness, presence, deeper consciousness. Bob began to see his mind work, the ceaseless flow of thought. But from a deeper intelligence, he glimpsed that his ego, personality, conditioning, etc. weren't his thoughts unless he chose to act on them. As the habit of worry dropped away, Bob discovered, to his astonishment, that all life became more and more joyful, the world more beautiful, people more connected.

What to avoid...

● **Analyzing:** Don't try to intellectually master worry. It's impossible to figure out. Bob didn't care why he worried; it was enough to know that he did.

● **Lacking compassion:** "Bob" (the personality) was innocently trying to live with worry, to do the best he could given his initial level of awareness. If he berated himself for all this anxiousness or wallowed in regret, he was actually going nowhere in terms of change.

● **Avoiding the negative stuff that comes up:** Bob went to people that he felt he had harmed by worrying too much, put the issue on the table, acknowledged the hurt he had caused, and asked for forgiveness. A simple act, it requires deceptive courage for the first time or two but then offers nothing but upside.

A book that helped Bob face his thought habits was Eknath Easwaran's *Dialogue with Death*. Easwaran describes how we tend to allow external stimuli to distract us from vital reflection about the Self. In other words, we focus on the people and events "making" us worry instead of attending to the internal influences on our thoughts about those factors.

Easwaran writes, "It is like getting someone to sit at his window and look out all day; if you can hold his head so that all he can do is look out, you can hide something right behind him, in his very own room, and he will never know." ■

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