

The Problem of Bedtime Worry

WHATIF

Last night, while I lay thinking here,
Some Whatifs crawled inside my ear
And pranced and partied all night long
And sang their same old Whatif song:
 Whatif I'm dumb in school?
Whatif they've closed the swimming pool?
 Whatif I get beat up?
 Whatif there's poison in my cup?
 Whatif I start to cry?
 Whatif I get sick and die?
 Whatif I flunk that test?
Whatif green hair grows on my chest?
 Whatif nobody likes me?
Whatif a bolt of lightning strikes me?
 Whatif I don't grow taller?
Whatif my head starts getting smaller?
 Whatif the fish won't bite?
 Whatif the wind tears up my kite?
 Whatif they start a war?
 Whatif my parents get divorced?
 Whatif the bus is late?
Whatif my teeth don't grow straight?
 Whatif I tear my pants?
 Whatif I never learn to dance?
Everything seems swell, and then
The nighttime Whatifs strike again!

- Shel Silverstein, A Light in the Attic

People are vulnerable to worry about everything. From major life decisions to minor tasks, we may ruminate, become alarmed, and often predict the worst possible consequences. Often we perceive danger and threat to be everywhere and anticipate events or consequences to be bigger or worse than they are likely to be in actuality. At other times, we are more realistic in our assessment of dangers or threats and therefore worry less.

Whether excessive or realistic, worry is seldom a productive endeavor. First, worry tends to involve uncontrolled mental activity. That is, we do it even at times when we would rather not. Secondly, worry involves emotional distress that serves as an obstacle to good problem-solving. Rather than thinking clearly about the problem and generating realistic solutions, we tend to focus only on how bad the situation is when we worry. Thirdly, worry uses a great deal of physical and mental energy without anything being accomplished. Worry does not push us toward productive behavior, but only toward more and more worry.

Often people *believe* that if they worry hard enough, the bad event or consequence they fear will not occur, or if it does, they will be ready *because they worried about it*. This myth is

maintained when people incorrectly draw connections between their worry and a satisfactory outcome (e.g., “If I hadn’t stayed up and worried about my son being out late then he would have been in an accident” or “If I hadn’t obsessed about my speech all night I would have blown it for sure”).

Worry can be a significant obstacle to sleep. Often it is only after we are free from the daytime distractions of work, family, television and socializing and we settle down to sleep that our minds begin to focus on various problems and concerns. This *cognitive* arousal often triggers *emotional* and *physical* arousal, all of which can have an interfering effect on sleep onset. It is difficult to simultaneously worry and be relaxed enough to fall asleep.

Eliminating worry may not be realistic or even desirable; however, the skills needed to control worry and decrease its impact on sleep can be learned. Three such techniques are *worry times*, *imagery*, and *worry logs*.

Worry Times. If you are the type of person who lies in bed with thoughts racing through your head about things you have to do, problems you are facing, or events that could happen, you might benefit from a worry time¹. A worry time is simply a period of time, perhaps 30 minutes scheduled well before bedtime, during which you deal with the problems and concerns you have so you don’t have to do so at bedtime.

1. Begin this time by finding a quiet place to sit in which you can avoid interruptions. As you sit and relax, write down each worry or concern that comes into your head on a 3x5 note card. Do not try to edit out little concerns or “silly” worries. If it occurs to you at all, write it down on a card.
2. When you have exhausted your mind of all worries, begin to categorize the cards into piles. This will help you establish more order to the problems so you feel more in control. You can choose categories that are helpful for you. You might organize them into piles labeled “Big Concerns, Medium Concerns,” and “Small Concerns.” Another option would be to categorize them by content area, such as “Work Concerns,” “Family Concerns,” “Financial Concerns,” and “Relationship Concerns.” Any means of categorizing can be used, however it is important not to use too many categories. Usually between three and seven works best.
3. Once the cards are in categories, write on the bottom of each card how you might manage the problem. The SOLVE strategy discussed below can be helpful here. If the problem is something you have absolutely no control over, you might write down “I’m not going to worry about this problem because there is nothing I can do about it right now.”

The goal of the worry time is to process each problem to some extent and make a decision on what you will do about it so you can free your mind of it.

¹Hauri, P. & Linda, S. (1990). No more sleepless nights. Wiley, New York.

Imagery. A second technique for controlling worry is to use imagery. One way to use imagery is to distract your mind from your worries by imagining something else, such as a pleasant memory or scene. While this can be helpful in achieving a state of physical relaxation and for providing short-term relief from your worries, it does little for resolving your worries in the long run.

An alternative to this is to actually use mental imagery to picture the situation you are most worried about. Your first reaction to this may be, *“This is what I do anyway. It will only worsen the problem!”* Actually, when we worry, our mind tends to rapidly jump from image to image, racing from one terrible, awful scenario to another and this maintains our high level of worry. When we stop this mental game of “leapfrog” and simply focus on one bad scene for an extended period of time, we begin to *habituate* to the scene, and the worry we feel in response to the scene weakens. This is because our perceptions of threat tend to change as we are exposed to the source of our fear. For example, if I am frightened by snakes but force myself to sit in a room with a snake for several hours, I will eventually feel more relaxed around the snake. In the course of the time spent with the snake I will likely have reevaluated my thoughts about the degree of danger that snake represents to me. I also will have simply tired of being frightened. This is what can happen to your worry when you use the imagery technique to control your worry.

The following imagery exercise is best done well before bedtime so that it does not interrupt your sleep.

1. Pick something you are worried about and generate the worst possible outcome of that worry. Avoiding the worst possible event will defeat the purpose of the exercise.
2. Concentrate on this mental image, allowing the image to be as vivid and real as you can.
3. Rate the worry you feel while imagining this scene on a 1 to 10 scale, with 1 being low worry and 10 being extreme worry. If your worry rating is less than 5, you should continue to think of even worse possible outcomes.
4. Now keep this image in your mind for at least 25-30 minutes.
5. During this time you can generate a list of alternatives to the worst possible outcome, or practice a relaxation technique to reduce muscle tension, but do not lose the image.

As you practice this procedure, you will likely experience a reduction in the degree of worry you have about this problem. You can now repeat the process with other worries that arise.

Worry Log. A final technique you may want to try to control worry is a worry log. It is simpler than the imagery exercise and it may be sufficient. When you find your mind buzzing with thoughts of tasks that need to be completed or issues that need to be dealt with, it can be helpful to write down these things on a list. Don't be concerned with categorizing the worries or finding solutions as with the Worry Time. Simply generate a list. The idea of the worry log is to

transfer the thoughts that are going through your head onto paper so they can be dealt with at a more opportune time. Often, worry is maintained by an underlying belief that if we stop thinking about an issue, even for a minute, we will forget about it forever, and something important will go undone. Although this belief is generally untrue, making a list in your worry log can relieve you of that concern.

Steps for *SOLVE*

When you do take the time to think about problems or concerns in your life, it will be helpful to think about them in a constructive way. The SOLVE technique described below will help you to develop effective solutions to problems that can be resolved.

***S* tate the problem**

***O* utline the problem**

***L* ist possible solutions**

***V* iew the consequences**

***E* xecute your solution**

Read through the SOLVE steps that are outlined below.

1. **State the problem.**

The first step to solving problems is to identify what they are. Once you've identified a situation, rate how much of a problem it is for you on a 0 to 10 scale, where 0 is "not at all a problem" and 10 is "very much a problem."

2. **Outline the problem.**

Outline the specific aspects of the problem. Include information such as:

- a) who was there,
- b) where did it occur,
- c) when did it happen,
- d) what led up to the event,
- e) what happened after the event, and
- f) how did you respond to the event.

How you responded to the situation is important. Why? Because many times you can't change what happens, but often *you can change how you respond* to what happens. The goal of SOLVE is to try to find new and better ways of responding to problem situations.

Outlining the problem may be the most important part of the SOLVE exercise. Accurately describing a problem often helps reveal good solutions. Be sure to ask yourself what role *you* are playing in the problem situation. Pay special attention to how your thoughts may be contributing to the problem. This can be a difficult step. The point is not to make yourself feel

guilty or give yourself a hard time, but to help you to realize that there is a lot you can do to resolve the problem.

3. **List possible solutions.**

The goal here is to think of many possible solutions. Be careful not to start evaluating any of the solutions before you have finished listing possible options. Evaluation will lead to criticism, and criticism might stop you from thinking of possible solutions before you have discovered the best one! Here are some guidelines to help you generate as many ideas as you can:

a) *Be creative and willing to give “off the cuff” solutions.* Don’t be afraid to come up with unlikely or unusual suggestions. At a second glance, the “unlikely” solution may be the most likely to succeed.

b) *Quantity is best.* The more ideas you can generate the greater the chance that you’ll come up with a solution that will work well.

c) *Combine and improve your ideas.* Go back over your list to see if any of your ideas can be grouped together. Sometimes a combination of solutions is your best bet.

d) *Consider changing your reactions as a possible solution.* Sometimes problem situations can not be resolved or the solution takes a long time to be effective. In either of these cases, helpful solutions often include doing things to change how you are reacting to situation.

4. **View the consequences.**

After you have listed the solutions, then decide which one is best. Examine the possible positive and negative consequences of each solution. Make some notes on what these consequence are. It may help to ask yourself questions like these:

a) Is this a long-term or a short-term solution? What will happen in the short-run if I carry out this solution? What will happen in the long-run?

b) Will more good come from this solution than harm?

c) How will this solution affect other people?

d) How likely is it that I really can carry out this solution?

e) How will I feel if I choose this solution? Might I regret it? Will I be proud of myself?

f) Will this solution only partly solve the problem? Will it completely get rid of the problem?

Try to come up with at least one positive and one negative consequence of each possible solution. After you have carefully considered the possible solutions, choose the best one.

When viewing possible solutions, you should try to be optimistic. An important purpose of SOLVE is to encourage you to think of solutions you may not have considered before and to help you try something new. Being negative or pessimistic will reduce your chances of carrying out new solutions.

When trying to change your behavior, it can be very helpful to have the support of your family or your friends. It's often a good idea to take the time to talk to a friend or a loved one about the changes you are trying to make. You can ask them to help you generate solutions to your problem situation. Or you can ask them for feedback about a solution you have chosen. Knowing that someone you trust and can depend on agrees with your choice can help you have confidence in your decision. It's nice to have someone to depend on for help in case everything doesn't work out just right. And it's nice to have someone to share your accomplishments with when things go well.

5. ***Execute your solution.***

This is the toughest part of the exercise. Before actually trying to carry out your solution, go over it in your mind. Try to anticipate any possible road blocks so that you won't get discouraged if things don't work out.

When you're ready, execute your solution. Then write down some notes on how things turned out. Is the problem situation less stressful? How satisfied are you with the outcome? Then rate your problem again using the same scale you used in step 1. If you're not satisfied, try going back over steps 2, 3, and 4, and select a different solution. Then try again.

Suggestion: Pick out one of these techniques (worry time, imagery or worry log) and practice it daily for the next week. After a few days, see if you notice a reduction in night time worry.