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 Arlington Street Church
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Don't Worry!

Arlington Street's Dan Hardenbergh knows a lot about worrying: Two of his five children died of alcoholism. But recently, when I spoke with him at his retirement community in Duxbury, he said, "I've stopped worrying."

"I didn't give it up all at once," he said. "But once I finally really understood how utterly futile it is, and how much it's robbed me of the present, I decided to quit. Worrying doesn't help anything; it just makes you miserable."

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I am not a worrier, but I come from a champion line of worriers; I married into a champion line of warriors; and my children are all champion warriors. I know a little bit about worrying and the end of worrying, which seems like a worthy reflection in these worrisome times.

Worrying is also known as the "what if" disease. It can wreak havoc on our mental and physical well-being. We think that worrying somehow prepares us for the worst. We go over and over something, sure that some new insight will surface from our roiling minds. Or somehow, we believe that worrying will help to avoid bad things from happening — that it has some magical power.

"People worry because they think something bad will happen or could happen," writes Dr. Robert L. Leahy, author of *The Worry Cure*, "so they activate a hypervigilant strategy of worry and think that if I worry I can prevent this bad thing from happening, or catch it early." British Anglican priest William R. Inge wrote, "Worry is interest paid on trouble before it is due." Worrying is a problem, not a solution.

My friend Peter Fleck of blessed memory tells the story of his daughter Ann's first plane ride. She sat, staring out the window, sure that watching the wing was going to keep it from falling off. When her food arrived, she left it untouched, until the kind man sitting next to her said, "I could keep an eye on things for you, if you'd like, so you could get something to eat."

Here's the most interesting research I read about this: Worrying actually makes us temporarily less anxious. Running over and over a problem distracts us from our emotions. Also, strangely, it makes us feel like we're accomplishing something. But worrying and problem solving are two different things:

- * Worrying does not lead to solutions. Dwelling on catastrophes, frozen with fear, in no way prepares us to deal with them should they actually happen.

- * Problem solving involves evaluating a situation, coming up with action steps to deal with it, and putting the plan into action. ¹

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, "If a problem is fixable, if a situation is such that you can do something about it, then there is no need to worry. If it's not fixable, then there is no help worrying. There is no benefit in worrying whatsoever." Indian mystic Meher Baba² often concluded his cables to his followers in the West, "Don't worry, be happy." In the 1960s, it was printed on inspirational cards and posters, which inspired Bobby McFerrin's song for the soundtrack of the movie *Cocktail* and became a hit single in 1989.

As we well know, "Don't worry, be happy" is easier said than done, but there are some great remedies for worrying. Here are a handful.

First, boundary your worrying; literally *make time to worry*. Ideally, worry time would be at the same time every day, and early enough so that you don't take the residue to bed with you. Set the parameters of time you're willing to give to worrying — say, 20 minutes — and have at it. Ready, set, go: Worry about whatever you'd like! And then stop. Put it all away until tomorrow.

Worrying has a tendency to distort reality. We become mind-readers or fortune tellers, and we tell ourselves stories, minus the facts. Worst-case scenarios become the norm. French philosopher Michel de Montaigne said, "My life has been full of terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened." A good use of worry time is to challenge these thoughts, sorting through what we know to be true or not.

¹ Lawrence Robinson, Melinda Smith, Robert Segal, and Jeanne Segal, *How to Stop Worrying*, June, 2019. Please see hlepguide.org/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm

² born in 1894

Interestingly, worries tend to lose some of their power when we write them down. If a worry creeps in off-hours, no need to address it right then; jot it down and return to it during worry time. In the opening minutes of worry time, you can go over your list. If you're able to downgrade or cross off something, great.

A second remedy for worrying is to get moving. Exercise is a natural way to get out of your head, especially if you can get some fresh air, too.

A third remedy is meditation — literally changing your mind. Regular meditation boosts activity on the left side of the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for feelings of serenity and joy. The more we practice, the more relief from worrying.³ If you don't know how to meditate, come back here on Tuesday evening at 7:00. Between now and then, you can try sitting quietly, closing your eyes and breathing naturally, and letting your mind settle. If thoughts arise, return to focus on your breathing — no judgment. Even a few moments of this stillness help.

There's a great quote from the Bible's first epistle of Peter that says, "Be alert, be vigilant, be sober, because your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour."⁴ You might wonder, what will mere awareness do for worry? Mysteriously, almost magically, it does enough. And if you're someone who prays, I highly recommend it. Jesus says, "Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"⁵ Ask for help, and give away your worry.

Fourth, we can't underestimate the power of building a strong support system. It may include a therapist, and it almost certainly should include putting in the work to build relationships with people you can trust and count on to be there for you. That starts with being trustworthy and someone whom others can count on. The makings of a strong support system are sitting all around you this morning. After church, go downstairs and sit next to someone at lunch and find out how they're doing. Help out at the card table or in the kitchen. Show up on Thursday night for choir practice. James Taylor sings, "Once you tell somebody the way that you feel, you can feel it beginning to ease."

³ *ibid*

⁴ Peter I 5:8

⁵ Matthew 6:27

And finally, fifth, my favorite remedy for worrying is to do something — especially, do something for someone else. Colorado’s former representative Pat Schroeder says, “You can’t wring your hands and roll up your sleeves at the same time.”

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There’s a true story told by an anonymous author concerning the carpenter he’d hired to help him restore an old farmhouse. The first day on the job was rough; “a flat tire made him lose an hour of work, his electric saw quit, and ... his ancient pickup truck refused to start. While I drove him home,” writes the author, “he sat in stony silence.

“On arriving, he invited me in to meet his family. As we walked toward the front door, he paused briefly at a ... tree, touching the tips of the branches with both hands. When [he stepped into his house], he underwent an amazing transformation, [breaking into a smile, hugging] his two small children, and [giving] his wife a kiss.

“Afterwards, he walked me [back] to the car. We passed the tree and my curiosity got the better of me. I asked him about what I’d seen him do earlier.

“O, that’s my [worry] tree,” he replied. ‘I ... can’t [seem to] help having [worries] on the job, but one thing’s for sure: [Worries] don’t belong in the house with my wife and [kids]. So I just hang them on the tree when I come home [at night]. Then in the morning, I pick them up again.

“Funny thing is,’ he smiled, ‘when I come out in the morning to pick them up, there aren’t nearly as many as I remember hanging up the night before.’”

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I can’t vouch for the scientific accuracy of these numbers, but they sound about right to me:

40% of what we worry about is in the future and will never happen.

30% of what we worry about is in the past and concerns things that cannot be changed.

12% of what we worry about concerns criticism, mostly untrue, made by people who feel inferior.

10% of what we worry about is related to our health, which is actually made worse by worry.

... leaving a mere 8% of what we worry about in the category of legitimate concerns, which can be addressed once we’ve eliminated senseless worry.

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Beloved spiritual companions,

The “what if” disease is a problem, not a solution.

Boundary your worrying,
get moving,
meditate, pray,
build a strong support system,
do something especially for someone else.

Don't worry. Be happy.