



'WORRYING IS toxic to your health and takes you nowhere positive.'
(Nease/TNS)

Scared to death

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Two sisters I know, giving me permission to share this if it can help others, told me how scared they were to go for mammography. They were so scared that they could barely pick up the phone to make an appointment, let alone wait for the results.

These women, two of the nicest people I know, are bright, articulate professionals. Whatever stereotype one might hold of someone who could be so frightened, these high-powered women are the complete opposite. Yet their fear is tremendous and real. They readily acknowledge that they're paralyzed by their "cancer phobia" to the point that it could be detrimental to their health. Contemplating booking an appointment has them playing "mind games," holding conversations with themselves certain that what "might be" will "definitely" become their reality; it's just a matter of time.

Many people, especially as they age, wonder what dreaded disease lurks around the corner. Some believe they currently have an undetected illness, and are convinced it's just a matter of time until they'll be diagnosed. Others worry that they'll become ill. Some days it seems that everyone you speak with has or knows someone who is unwell, making it easy to worry that you'll be next. I have jokingly suggested to my husband that if I could have clients walk through a doorway and have a light turn red or green with 100 percent accuracy to mark whether on that day they were healthy or not, I could calm a lot of people. Would people return each day just to know that all is okay, or would they never cross the threshold for fear that today the light may be red?

The knowledge that we could trip and injure ourselves badly doesn't keep most of us at home. So why does the fear of an unknown illness that we don't have now, and may never have, paralyze us? The unknown is frightening and we imagine the worst, anticipating things far worse than they typically are. As someone who had cancer, I have found that the paperwork and bureaucracy are far more painful than any medical

procedure. While some who choose not to do preventive health screening are happy keeping their heads in the sand and assume no news is good news, others go for screening without giving it much thought. Some people who don't go worry themselves sick.

While telling someone not to worry does nothing to keep them from worrying, teaching someone how not to worry is helpful and easy to learn. Although it seems that it's easy to worry and hard not to worry, the truth is that it really doesn't have to be. Worrying is toxic to your health and takes you nowhere positive. In other words, more worrying doesn't make anything better and worrying can actually make the situation worse. It's for this reason that I spend a good part of my week teaching people of all ages how not to worry.

Here are some tools:

1. The buddy system really can help. Find a calm person to share your concerns and your burden will be lighter.

2. Each person has their own set of worries. What petrifies one doesn't bother another at all. Identify the triggers that set you on the path of concern and worry. What are your concerns? Are they reality based and helpful? Be very specific (e.g. I am worried that...). Write them down. Our worries are often reflections of our childhood fears that never got properly mastered. As adults, we still look at certain things through a child's eye, and with the same fear.

3. What do you notice in your body when you think of these things? Understanding and listening to your body is your best resource for promoting calm and quelling anxiety. Likewise, ignoring your body's messages often results in making you worse.

4. Calming your fears requires "being in the moment." Take in a slow deep breath through your nose and let it out very slowly through your mouth. This very moment, take an inventory of how you feel, starting with your head and working your way to your toes. All is okay, right?

5. Acknowledge that thoughts come into your mind all the time. You have no control over what thoughts come in and when, but you can control what you do with those thoughts once they enter. Learn to actively

put off thinking about these thoughts to a later, more acceptable, time when you can better control them, rather than feeling controlled by the thoughts and being immersed in negativity. Pick a 15-minute time slot during the week as your worry time, worry only then, and then put your worries away for the week. Pull on an imaginary elastic band on your wrist whenever you worry and remind yourself of your worry time. I've taught hundreds of people to do this easily and effectively.

6. Worry only when there are things you really need to worry about. Being in the moment can change when and how you continue to worry. Actually there is nothing to worry about because worry doesn't help, right? For example, a few years back I went for my mammography believing I had no need to worry until I had to. The results being suspicious, I repeated, "No news is no news – why waste my thoughts on worry?" Being told the answer from the biopsy would take 10 days meant I had to give myself permission to not go to the worry place that entire time. Worry would not change the result, only keep me from living those 10 days to the fullest. When the doctor called to tell me the results, that yes, I had cancer, but being early stage, potentially totally curable, I had no reason to worry. The same was true for the surgery, radiation, etc. "What ifs" are future uncertainties that don't help in this moment.

So, now that I've booked my next mammogram and my routine colonoscopy is over, I will not allow myself to feel at all anxious until maybe the night before. I will then take the worry "out," acknowledge my concern, remind myself that there is no need to worry until I have to, say a prayer, hope all will be well. I will acknowledge that as I did in the past, I will deal with whatever I have to, if I have to, when I have to. Until then, I prefer to celebrate daily the small things in life that I can be so grateful for.

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