

# The Stress Monster loves worrywarts

**Advice Line**

by Dr. Betty Phillips



Stress, worries, anxiety, all are mind-body states which perform useful functions at times but too often become excessive and inappropriate. I'll explain.

Let's start with the stress response. In an emergency situation your body needs a generalized mobilization response to cope with danger immediately. If an out-of-control truck is careening toward you, the stress response is your best friend. Heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate increase to transport energy, nutrients and oxygen as rapidly as possible to the critical muscles enabling you to run from the truck. Safely out of the way of the truck, the stress response should shut off immediately. Constantly mobilized stress responses will cause fatigue, tension, nervous agitation and physical maladies if periods of calm do not predominate between emergency responses. An interesting book (*Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, Third Edition, Holt, 2004) explains the problem of the stress response created by worry in modern-day living. Zebras don't worry about income taxes or car

repairs, and so they are able to switch off their stress responses efficiently. We have the gift of thought which zebras don't have. If zebras did worry, they might get ulcers worrying about the effects of climate change, whether elephants were going to charge their territory, whether they would make it to the waterhole, and so forth.

Worry is one kind of anxiety. Psychologists will tell you that a little



"anticipatory anxiety" can be functional in helping you cope with challenges. Planning to avert probable disasters can be quite useful. Again, the trick is to keep this skill in balance and use it only when necessary. Some people think that constant worry is useful in that it will make your life more predictable. But always focusing on worst-case scenarios will not keep you safe or keep feared events from occurring. It just will keep you from enjoying the good things in your life. Worry can become chronic and even addictive. One day you are a planner

and the next you are a "worrywart" or a doctor diagnoses you with "generalized anxiety." You worry excessively and needlessly and cannot turn it off, interrupting sleep, pleasure, even digestion and immunity.

There are many techniques to help the worrywart. But let me caution you about a common misconception. You can't just make yourself stop worrying. When you think about not worrying, you are actually thinking about worrying. Your brain cannot process negatives in this way and so is constantly primed to think about worrying. But you can designate "worry periods" to set a time and place for worrying, postpone your worries until that time, then make notes and plans during your worry period. If you have worry thoughts at other times, you can jot down a note and postpone until your worry period. Your worry time should be early enough so that you will not be anxious right before bedtime. Other techniques include improving problem-solving to deal with issues without worry and learning to challenge worries head on. Worrywarts usually cannot stand doubt or unpredictability. Learning to tolerate uncertainty will lessen worrying. Relaxation techniques help reduce the mental and physical tension of excessive worry. Living in the present tense is an

effective antidote to worry. After all, worry is thinking about past problems and/or projecting future problems. Worry will bring past or possible future problems to life in your mind without those issues actually occurring in the present. You can deal with current problems without worry. Eckhart Tolle has provided a useful explanation of this approach in *The Power of Now* (New World, 2004). I recommend the audio version of this book (New World, 2010.) I even have a new program for my computer which has a traveling banner across my desktop with my intention to be "joyful, peaceful and calm." These words are a helpful signal to body and mind to remain in this positive state of being.

So now you can begin your transition from a worrywart to a calm and peaceful new life. There are many techniques which can be utilized to help decrease excessive anxiety; a good therapist or life coach can help individualize a plan for you. So Happy Spring!

**Need advice?**

Send Dr. Betty Phillips questions about individual, relationship, marriage or family issues to [BettyPhillips@BellSouth.net](mailto:BettyPhillips@BellSouth.net) or 466 Eagle Point Road, Pittsboro 27312. Questions can be anonymous. Betty looks forward to hearing from you!

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