

What Do You Worry About?

I have always worried a lot. The subject matter is not consistent. Sometimes it focuses on money, sometimes health of loved ones, safety, social faux pas, engagements, responsibilities, and on and on it goes. Sometimes the worries are centered on subject matter so trivial and other times they are about life altering issues. The only thing that they have in common is that they seem to have a life of their own, becoming insurmountable concerns gathering strength, especially powerful in the middle of the night. Usually with the sunrise comes a glimmer of relief.

The solution to these worries, so elusive just a few hours before, seems attainable at last. Most of the things that keep my adrenaline pumping in the predawn hours seem less important once daylight arrives. I know this and sometimes even attempt to self-shot by telling myself that things always seem worse at night and to fall back asleep and wait for the morning to clear my head. Unfortunately, this is seldom successful, and I still cannot fight the dreaded anxiety that plagues some of my nights. That is not to suggest that worry is not a part of my day. Despite this, I am not crippled by it, just mildly handicapped. In fact, most days I do not consciously notice that I am worrying. It is just a part of my complex quasi-type A personality. I am a planner. Open ended issues do not sit well with me. If there is a problem, I like to dissect it to bits and tackle it with black and white solutions. The “let’s let the chips fall where they may, or cross that bridge when we come to it” attitude gives me anxiety. It is because of this that I find myself making hasty decisions and sometimes reacting too powerfully to situations that would have been better handled with some time to contemplate a measured response.

My dog is dying. That is to say that she is a 13-year-old Labrador retriever who has limbs that can barely carry her and a spleen the size of a grapefruit. I love her more than any words can express. I walked into my vet’s office announcing through my sobs that I know time is short and suffering is not an option. The vet looked her over, did some tests and confirmed that my Lucy could have a couple of days or even

weeks left. I brought her home and commenced to grieve furiously. It is now a frenzy of hugging, holding and stroking her constantly. I refuse to leave her in the house alone for fear that she may feel abandoned and lonely in her “dying” state. I announced to my husband and my teenage daughter that Lucy would not be with us for long and although their love is no less than mine, they are able to pat her head and enjoy her companionship without the lead weights of sorrow taking the joy out of every moment spent with her. It is my obsessive worry that is holding me down where I must gasp for air. I question what it is that I am worrying about. I already know the inevitable. Yes, Lucy will leave and there will be a void. I will miss her. She will not suffer. I won’t allow it. That is a benefit that animals have over humans when they are cared for by a loving family who can help facilitate their departure from life. I do not have to make a black and white decision about when she goes. I will not burden myself with the second guess of a hasty closure to her life because I can’t bear the worry. She will let me know. Worrying implies a fear of the unknown. Here there is no unknown. I know. It is the realization that worry does not apply. Grief is premature. This epiphany releases me to see worry for what it is. It is a thief of time and joy.

Of course, knowing and feeling are so disconnected from one another. The only way that I can truly eradicate this worry burden is to remind myself that it is robbing me of a lovely bittersweet time with someone that I love. Joy, pain, love, and grief are necessary and inevitable. Worry is a choice. This I believe.

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Last week, I mentioned that we have a choice to make about worrying. We choose whether to worry about something. If you're a chronic worrier, I suspect you might disagree with that statement and insist that you can't help it. I'd like to share a couple of ways to help you manage your worries.

Worry is a valid emotion, but sometimes we need to step back and think about the things that concern us. The key question to ask ourselves is, "What am I worrying about?" Is it something that's happening right now or is it something that might possibly happen down the track? If something happens now, is there anything you can do about it? If so, identify what you can do and do it, or note when you're going to do it.

If there's nothing you can do about the situation, it is often referred to as a hypothetical worry. An example might help here. A couple of weeks ago, I had an OPG (full mouth x-ray) taken. A few days later I had a phone call from the dentist's receptionist saying my dentist would like to investigate a couple of spots on the x-ray. I made an appointment to see the dentist as soon as possible (the only thing I could do at that point). Like any normal person, in my mind I went to the worst-case scenario. That's when my worry went from being a real problem to being a hypothetical worry. Yes, I could have a major problem, but it was unlikely. All the worrying in the world wasn't going to change anything and I'd take the only possible step that I could. Worrying about the situation and dwelling about it was only going to cause me a lot of stress. I had to make a choice to let the worry go. If the dental situation was problematic, I'd deal with things as they arose. It has taken time to develop the habit of questioning my worries, but it's well worthwhile practicing it. Excessive worrying can cause a lot of pain and may lead to anxiety in some folks.

How many of the things did you worry about last year? Be honest with yourself. I would suggest that most of them never materialize. If they did, you obviously got through them. Next week, I'll share another tool for managing worries.

(By the way: My trip to the dentist went well. There were no problems. I was so glad I hadn't wasted a week of my life worrying; however, I do have to confess to feeling a great sense of relief as I left the dental surgery.)

Another great verse from the Bible about worrying comes from John 14:27 where Jesus says – 'Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid.'

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I never used to consider myself a worry wart, and most of the time, I still don't. But as I get older, I feel myself becoming more anxious about the possibilities of the future. After graduating college, I remember my biggest revolution being something quite simple: anything can happen now. In school, life feels very systematic. But after I graduated and moved to Japan, I realized that the Real World lacked that same consistency — anything was possible, both good and bad.

I still aim to be optimistic about the future and generally have positive thoughts about what might happen in my life. But from time-to-time I find myself getting worried, especially with friendships, relationships, and perhaps most considerably in terms of my dog. I've never had a "child" to take care of, so I'm always thinking about his safety and well-being. Though I don't always show it, I have a deep sense of worry about what could happen to him — or maybe more realistically, what would happen to me if something happened to him.

The problem with worrying is that the things we worry about almost never even happen. It's like we create an alternate reality where only the negative possibilities occur. And yet, that reality only exists because we made it so. I find strength in knowing that I have an unrelenting power to squash those fears and lean in hard to the positive circumstances of my actual, waking life.

Earlier this year, I read Brené Brown's *Daring Greatly* (my review [here!](#)). Her phenomenal book centered on how we can go "all in" in our lives, which usually means allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. In her book, she explains that we can't love anyone or anything with all our heart if we allow fear any place in our relationships. If we're worrying about what might happen — death, betrayal, etc. — then

we're not opening ourselves up completely, for fear that sharing that final piece of ourselves will destroy us if shit really does end up hitting the fan. But Brené argues that giving your whole self is the only way to build truly meaningful relationships and experiences. In her words, "There is no intimacy without vulnerability."

Now, I don't want to leave you with these thoughts without a solution. And luckily for both of us, this one is simple. When you're feeling that sense of worry, then the best thing you can do is replace it with gratitude. Be grateful for the moment you are given right now. Cherish the ones in your life, even if they may not be there next year. When someone gives you a piece of themselves, take it. Devour it. Be grateful that it was given to you, rather than fearful it may one day be taken away.

In Cheryl Strayed's *Tiny Beautiful Things*, she says, "It's gratitude that you should be feeling in place of jealousy and insecurity and fear. I encourage you to reach for that gratitude. It's located just a stretch beyond the 'crazed fire' that's burning in your head. Let yourself be gutted. Let it open to you. Start there."

Where will you start today, friend? What worries will you replace with gratitude?