

'My life has been full of terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened'

– Montaigne –

- 1 **Pinpoint the worrying thought:** Worrying thoughts are often the result of half-formed ideas chasing each other around in your mind. This vicious circle can be broken by identifying and airing the worrying thought. Write down your top five worrying thoughts. Bringing them out into the open relieves the pressure.
- 2 **Look at the evidence:** What is the evidence? Instead of assuming that your thought is true, examine the actual evidence. Write down on a sheet of paper the evidence for both sides of the argument. What is the probability that your thought is correct? Rate the thought on a percentage scale (0%–100%) in terms of how much you actually now believe it. For example, 'I am useless at this job' . . . Believability = 30%.
- 3 **Explore the worst possible outcome:** What is the worst thing that can happen? Fantasy is usually worse than reality. Imagine walking into a dark deep cave. You might feel frightened because you would not be able to see what is stretching ahead of you. Then imagine turning on a powerful torch which shines on the walls, showing the limits of the cave. More often than not our fantasies are much worse than a clearly identified worst option. Once we have placed limits on our worries, by identifying the worst possible outcome, they are easier to deal with.
- 4 **Put yourself in somebody else's shoes:** What alternative views are there? How would someone else view this situation? Think of two or three significant people in your life and imagine how they would view this situation? Talk to yourself out loud. What advice would they give?
- 5 **Cost-benefit analysis:** What is the effect of thinking the way I do? Ask yourself. How will holding this thought help me and how will it hurt me? List the advantages and disadvantages of holding a particular negative thought.
- 6 **Think in shades of grey:** Am I thinking in all or nothing terms, or seeing things in a black or white fashion? Are you thinking of yourself as either 'a total success', or 'a total failure'. This common style of distorted thinking misses out on the middle ground, the grey area between the black and white. Remind yourself that things are usually somewhere between 0% and 100%, and rate where your negative thought is on that scale.
- 7 **Box your worries in:** If you are constantly plagued by worrying, set aside a specific time of twenty minutes as 'dedicated worry time'. Tackle each worry as a problem to think hard about and solve. If you find yourself worrying at other times during the day, postpone that worry until the allotted time.
- 8 **Keep perspective:** Compare the present problem with other really important issues in your life. For example, say that you are worrying because you are stuck in a traffic jam and are going to be late for a meeting. How does this compare with the worst upsetting time in your life, for example, when your mother was critically ill.
- 9 **Visualise yourself ten years after:** Will this worry matter in ten years time? Imagine that you are ten years older and are looking back to this time in your life. How important will this concern be in the long term? Looked at from a distance mountains can appear as molehills.
- 10 **Turn worry into action:** Ask yourself: Is there anything that I can do about this? Is there anything I can do to change the situation? Make a list of the things you could do. Worry is only useful when it spurs you on to solve problems.
- 11 **Distract yourself:** If you have reached the conclusion that there is nothing that you can do, then distract yourself with some absorbing activity. Our minds only have a limited capacity so if you start thinking about something else you can crowd out those worrying thoughts. Distraction can work on a macro level, where you might alter your lifestyle or take up a hobby. Distraction can also work on a micro level where you can take your mind off worrying thoughts by playing mental games, or focusing on a specific detail of your environment.