



THE “JUST WORRYING” LABELLING TECHNIQUE

Introduction

Most people have experienced times in their lives when worry takes over and becomes like a form of internally inflicted torture. In these situations our normal coping mechanisms seem to fail us. There is plenty of research now that shows that when we try to suppress thoughts in the normal way we end up having those thoughts substantially more. (Cioffi & Holloway 1993, Clark Ball & Pape 1991, Gold & Wegner 1995, Wegner, Schneider, Carter & White, 1987, Wegner, Schneider, Knutson & McMahon 1991)

However, there is a very simple but effective technique available which is based on the now popular approach called “mindfulness”. It is very effective at dealing with problematic worrying at the surface level. It provides a simple way of creating a distance from the worrying thoughts without generating an internal struggle. It relies on approaching the worry with an attitude of non-judgmental awareness. This step by itself is enough to deal effectively with the worrying thoughts.

If desired you can establish a deeper level of relaxation and emotional resilience by sitting with the physical feelings of anxiety in a non-judgmental way, with an attitude of curiosity. This is a more challenging technique, which is ultimately extremely satisfying and rewarding. It will be outlined in another handout called “Sitting with Difficult Feelings”.





The Actual “Just Worrying” Technique

The first step of this technique involves the differentiation of worrying from constructive problem solving. Constructive problem solving has zero or low levels of anxiety associated with it. Either you reach a solution or you don't. When you have gone as far as you can without reaching a solution, it is relatively easy to let go of the process until you get more information or have some sort of inspiration.

Worrying involves repetitive circular thinking, which is associated with anxiety and produces no practical outcomes that you can act upon. Worry is difficult to let go of even when you are making no progress and making yourself more and more anxious.

Normal distraction techniques don't seem to be very effective. The worrying thoughts just keep returning. Then you can have an internal battle as you try to banish the unwanted thoughts unsuccessfully. This in turn just makes you more tense. Your mind can become a pressure cooker that feels like it is ready to explode.

The “just worrying” technique simply involves labelling worry as “just worrying” and then bringing your attention back to your breath or simply changing the subject of your thinking. Every time you catch yourself worrying you just label it again and change the subject. It doesn't matter if you do it 10 times in one minute or if you only realise that you have been worrying after a period of two hours and then apply the technique. The important thing is that you apply the technique when you realise you are worrying.

This technique involves no criticism or internal struggle, just simple non- judgmental labelling. Therefore it is important in this regard that you do not change the label from “just worrying” to “don't worry”.

This technique is very powerful and most people find that their worrying thoughts dissipate almost totally within a few days. Then you usually start worrying about a week later because you have forgotten about the technique through lack of need to use it. When you remember and start practising the technique again, it is just as effective as before.

The same technique can be applied to other disturbing repetitive mental events using labels such as “just doubting” or “just criticising”. This is subtly but significantly different to avoidance. It is not running away from or suppressing the unpleasant mental stimulus. Rather it is the non-judgmental labelling which is encapsulated in the word “just”. This allows the worrying thoughts to come and go but takes the sting out of them. It is as if you are turning the gas off that is heating up the pressure cooker. Your mind simply calms down.



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