



Worrying & Stress

by award-winning author / stress-relief expert **Susie Mantell**

Q: Dear Susie, I am such a worrier! I don't want to be so negative, but I often am. How do I focus on something positive?

A: Some people get so invested in negative thought that they just kind of set up camp around the fire, and hang out there. Your awareness of your tendency toward worrying is the first step toward being able to see the world from a different perspective. It sounds like you'd like to find more cheer in your day-to-day thoughts, and I can assure you, it is there. It's a funny law of The Universe: As soon as we begin to look for "light" -- there it is!

I don't mean to minimize the internal torment of negativity, nor its adverse impact on others. It is a drain on our energy and our relationships, and can seriously impact our health, our work, our parenting and whatever else we do. "Gloom & Doom" worries are truly unpleasant, but they are extremely common whenever we are under excessive stress. Many also find worrying their default everyday response if it's what they saw others do while growing up, or even if it's what they see others around them doing now. In fact catastrophizing can become a kind of hobby if we choose -- "something to do" when our mind isn't fully occupied with something else.

Several years ago, I was in a bit of a funk. I was sad and frustrated and very worried. (It turned out that I was actually about to make some important changes in my life, but hadn't figured that out yet.) All I knew was that the glass was half-empty -- a *lot* of the time. I was spending a few days out at the beach with a dear friend who suggested an afternoon activity that ended up being a wonderful, silly-but-remarkably-effective catalyst. (*You may have heard people talk about chasing the blues by making a "gratitude list," of all the things you're thankful for. Some days you might have to dig deep: "I'm thankful that I don't have hairs growing out of the top of my nose."*) My friend suggested that rather than a Gratitude List to lift us out of the doldrums that day, we each compose a Thrills List of every thrill we'd ever had, every thrill we planned to have someday, and every thrill we'll probably never really experience -- but love thinking about! We took an hour, each in a private spot. We got very serious about our thrills, and we also got as silly as we felt. Sixty minutes later we were both doubled over laughing as we shared our lists with one another. Since that was a pretty effective start at lifting out spirits, next we decided to haul out the heavy artillery.

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Just in case that weren't enough to entirely alleviate a crabby mood, we went down to the edge of the ocean. Big, booming waves were breaking, and we each s-c-r-e-a-m-e-d into the ocean. We screamed about everything that was wrong, about everything we weren't willing to accept and just what we were going to do about it! (*Now I deeply love and respect the ocean. We had no intention of polluting those fabulous, majestic waves with our foul moods, but the breakers provided perfect camouflage so we couldn't be heard.*) Yelling at nobody can be a great way to blow off steam. Sometimes there are words to accompany the yelling, sometimes not. Sometimes it's just the release of tension that feels great. We were fortunate to be in a spot where there were no other people for quite a distance, so we wouldn't frighten anybody with our yelling. You can also "go screaming" in the mountains, or in a pinch, out on the open road in your car with the windows rolled up. (Pull over first!) The point is that if we discharge some of the negative energy we're holding in those big, heavy, worrisome thoughts, we create room for some light to take their place.

One last suggestion: If you are a worrier, do something kind for someone else every single day. It is a much healthier habit than worrying, and there is a cumulative, positive transformation that takes place when it becomes second nature to think about making someone else happy, rather than fretting unnecessarily.

It is so often said that, "Life is not the dress rehearsal. This is It." Every minute counts, and even when we truly *are* up against the wall in a very difficult situation, there is always, always hope. Believe me, I hit the wall some days too - everybody does. It's big and it's hard and it seems impenetrable. But once I figure out how to see past it, there's a lot of really good stuff on the other side!

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