

Having Difficulty Turning Off the Worries? Here Are the Strategies That Research Suggests May Work Best.

Description

Have you ever gotten a few days away from a recital or audition, and even if you didn't yet feel 100% ready, the anticipation and worry got to be so intense that you wished you could just play right that second and get it over with already? Where it's like the anticipation was worse than the stress of the actual event itself?

Kind of like how in the "slap bet" storyline in *How I Met Your Mother*, Barney was [more distressed by not knowing when he would be slapped, than by the slaps themselves?](#)

One of the reasons why this can happen, is something known as "perseveration cognition." This is where we mentally time travel into the future and get sucked into a loop of worrying about the negative things that could happen...like embarrassing memory slips, missed shifts, chipped notes, whether we're going to be able to find a reed that works, etc.

Or, we time travel into the past, and ruminate and obsess about moments that make us feel crappy...like replaying a little screwup in orchestra over and over in our heads, and wondering if that's why the conductor seemed kind of annoyed.

Aside from being a real downer to think about, these stressful thoughts also tend to activate the body's stress response. Which not only makes you feel physically stressed on top of everything else, but this type of thinking tends to *prolong* the physical stress response too, keeping you feeling stressed for longer periods of time.

The obvious advice would be to just stop doing that – but it's usually not quite that easy!

So...whether it's an upcoming audition, going back to in-person school or work, or the latest scary thing in the world that has popped into your news feed, what *can* we do to get our brain to worry and ruminate a little bit less?

What does the research say?

There are actually quite a lot of studies out there on the phenomenon of worry and rumination. And an awful lot of strategies aimed at reducing worry and rumination as well.

But...which ones actually work?

A team of researchers ([McCarrick et al., 2021](#)) set out to weed through all these studies and see if they could answer that question. To identify the strategies that not only helped to reduce worry and rumination, but were associated with the most positive impact on the person's health or health behaviors too (i.e. substance use, eating unhealthily, smoking, poor sleep, etc.).

And what did they find?

Seven strategies that were effective

Out of 10,703 studies related to worry and rumination, 36 met the researchers' criteria.¹

And across these 36 studies, the researchers identified seven main strategies that were not only effective in reducing worry and rumination, but seemed to contribute to healthier habits too (like eating/sleeping better).

The strategies included things like:

- action planning (i.e. techniques for managing worry/rumination more effectively)
- expressive writing (i.e. getting your stress and anxiety out on paper, rather than keeping it on a loop in your head)
- psychological detachment (i.e. strategies for leaving work at work, or creating some distance from situations or thoughts that stress you out)
- mindfulness and relaxation (i.e. ways of being more present and engaged in the current moment)
- cognitive behavioral therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy (i.e. learning to change negative or unhelpful thought patterns, and finding ways to navigate through stressful times more effectively)
- stress management and/or pain management (elements of which can be pulled from many of the other strategies above)

So what might these look like, in action?

A few things to try...

The researchers had a few suggestions (listed in no particular order):

1. Create a worry plan

If your goal is to spend less time worrying, it might sound kind of backwards to carve out some “worrytime” on your calendar. But research suggests that “batching” your worries or creating a worry “budget” where you give yourself specific blocks of time to worry during the day can help to reduce the time and energy spent worrying throughout the rest of your day. You can learn about [the 4-step worry-batching process here](#).

2. Write your worries down

Writing about the things that are stressing you out may also seem like a backwards strategy, because doesn't that mean you're spending more time focusing on the things that are making you feel crummy? Yet here too, studies have found that getting our worries onto paper, can have some surprising effects on mood, anxiety, physical health, and even performance. You can learn more about [why researchers think this is, and how to try this out, right here](#). I also found [this program](#), which sounds pretty intriguing – though I haven't tried it yet myself.

3. Switch off

Of course, at some point, you do want to do the thing that sounds obvious, and take a break from the thoughts and situations that are stressing you out. Like, finding a way to leave your audition rep in the practice room, and not allow it follow you out to dinner with your family or friends. Or making sure your passive aggressive colleague at work doesn't continue to stay in your head for the remainder of the evening.

This is often easier said than done, but whether it's meeting up with a friend, [doing some knitting](#), or adding a 24-hour block of absolutely-no-practicing-allowed time into your calendar (my teacher once gave me permission to do this – which was awesome...but totally stressed my mom out), [studies suggest that sometimes we can't afford *not* to do the things that we feel we don't have time for](#).

4. Control the controllables

It can be easy to obsess about things that we don't have direct control over, or get sucked into our thinking loops and try to fight the way we're feeling. But much like the mindset captured by the Alcoholics Anonymous serenity prayer – “*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; Courage to change the things I can; And wisdom to know the difference.*” – coaches, athletes, and psychologists alike have found that it can be helpful to focus relentlessly on only those things we have control over. And to even aim to [create some distance from our thoughts, so we can focus more effectively on the task at hand, and worry less about what could or has happened before](#).

5. Be present

Which speaks to the idea of mindfulness, and getting better at not just being in the present, but being less judgmental too (and yes, apparently that's a legit word now – I looked it up!). There are a ton of ways to practice

mindfulness and get better at interrupting the worry/rumination cycle, like breathing exercises or meditation, but one quick and easy technique is the “54321 technique.” You can [learn more about it here](#), but it basically involves paying attention to your immediate surroundings to identify 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch/feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste.

6. Get moving!

Whether it’s an easy run on concert days, some pre-audition yoga in your hotel room, or an [awe walk](#) before your morning practice session, the researchers note that being more physically active is another important strategy to keep handy in our toolbox as well.

Caveats

It’s important to note that only two of the studies involved participants who were diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. So the degree of worry or rumination that the majority of participants were experiencing may not have risen quite to the level that someone with generalized anxiety disorder, for instance, might be experiencing.

And even if we’re talking about more moderate levels of worry or rumination, keep in mind that these strategies are probably not going to stop 100% of your worry or rumination all the time. And different people will have different experiences of each of these strategies too.

Take action

But, hopefully it helps to know that there *are* some tools out there that can help you escape the worry and rumination spiral. And give you some ideas on what to experiment with, so that whether it’s the music or life part of your life, it don’t feel quite as much like you’re [Barney, waiting on pins and needles for the next slap](#). ???

Last-minute stress-practicing...

One of my less-than-productive habits was to do a lot of frantic last-minute cramming in the days leading up to a performance. Not because I’d been procrastinating necessarily, but more in an attempt to put my nerves at ease and convince myself that I didn’t have to worry.

It would just wear me out physically of course, and often be counterproductive mentally too. Because if something didn’t sound good, I’d worry even more.

I always promised myself that I would prepare better the next time, so that I could taper or ease up in the leadup to a performance, and not be so stressed out. But that never happened. Not because the desire wasn't there, but because I didn't actually know *how* to prepare so that I'd be truly performance-ready when the time came.

If you too have wished you could avoid stress-practicing in the days before a performance or audition, and approach the event with a little more confidence or excitement, I'd love to share with you the essential strategies, skills, and exercises that can help you be at your best when the moment comes.

If that sounds like fun, I'll be teaching a live, online, 4-week class for students and life-long learners in October. Registration is now open, and runs through **11:59pm Sunday, September 26th**. You can find out the cool things you'll learn, and sign up right here: [Performance Psychology Essentials for Learners](#)

References

McCarrick, D. J., Prestwich, A., Prudenzi, A., & O'Connor, D. B. (2021, January 8). Health Effects of Psychological Interventions for Worry and Rumination: A Meta-analysis. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/bsf9e>

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