

Anxiety as a Habit

The worry loop

Why worry keeps anxiety going, and how to step out of the loop.

One useful way to understand anxiety is as a habit loop. Anxiety sets off worry, and worrying briefly feels productive, as if you were doing something about the problem. That small reward teaches your brain to worry again next time, even though worry keeps the anxiety going.

Ⓢ ANXIETY AND WORRY ARE DIFFERENT THINGS

Anxiety is a feeling

Unease about something uncertain or still to come. You feel it in your body: a tight chest, a knot in your stomach, restlessness, a sense that something has to be done.

Worry is something you do

The thinking you do in answer to that feeling: going over what might happen, picturing the worst, rehearsing how you would handle it. It is almost always about the future.

Anxiety is what you feel. Worry is what you do with it, and that part can change with practice.

⚡ THE ANXIETY HABIT LOOP

1. Trigger

You feel anxious or unsure, or a thought comes up about something that could go wrong.

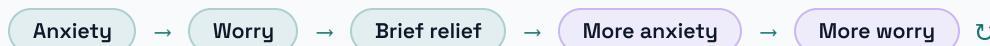
2. Behavior

You worry. You replay possibilities, imagine the worst, analyze what might happen, or rehearse how you would deal with it.

3. Reward

Worrying feels productive. It gives you something to do and a brief sense of relief or control.

HOW IT KEEPS ITSELF GOING



Worry does not remove the uncertainty. Picturing the threat again and again keeps it switched on, so the anxiety comes back and the loop starts over.

⚡ WHY WORRY FEELS HELPFUL

Anxiety comes with an uncomfortable push to do something. If the problem is in front of you, acting on it helps. Most anxiety is about the future, though, and the future can't be solved today.

Worrying gives your mind a job, so it feels better than sitting with not knowing. Feeling better for a minute is not the same as solving anything.

☀️ THE GOAL: GET BETTER AT NOT KNOWING

You will never be fully sure how things will turn out, and more thinking won't get you there.

The skill is to notice uncertainty and let it be there without answering it with worry. Each time you do, the habit gets a little weaker.

📖 WHEN YOU CATCH YOURSELF WORRYING

1. Notice it

Name what is happening: "I'm feeling uncertain, and my brain is starting to worry." Naming it puts a little space between you and the habit.

2. Get curious

What set this off? What am I doing right now? Is this worry helping me solve something today?

3. Act or allow

If there is a real step you can take, take it. If there is nothing to do yet, let the uncertainty sit there without trying to think your way out.

4. Come back

Notice how the anxiety feels in your body, with interest instead of alarm. Then bring your attention back to what is in front of you.

Ⓢ THE SHORT VERSION

Worry can relieve anxiety for a moment while keeping it going. Breaking the cycle means catching the worry habit and letting uncertainty be there without feeding it. With practice, your brain learns a new rule: not knowing does not have to mean worrying.

Source. Adapted from Jud Brewer, MD, PhD, "What If Anxiety Is a Habit, Not a Disorder?" (2025), which builds on Borkovec TD, "Worry: a potentially valuable concept," Behav Res Ther 1985.

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