

Exercise

Professional Version | US English

Worry Postponement



Description

Patients with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) spend significant amounts of time engaged in worry. Engagement in worry is reinforced by the beliefs that worry is uncontrollable, and that worry prevents the occurrence of negative events.

Worry postponement was first described in a study by Borkovec, Wilkinson, Folsenbee & Lerman (1983) where it was prescribed as a daily 30 minute 'stimulus control' task. The patient's task was to notice that they were worrying and then deliberately choose to delay engaging in the worry until a later time. Compared to a no-treatment condition this intervention led to significant reductions in the amount of reported daily worry.

Worry postponement has a range of beneficial effects including:

- Illustrating to clients that worries typically concern a limited number of themes
- Allowing clients to discover that postponed worries often feel irrelevant by the time they are revisited
- Helping to undermine client beliefs regarding the uncontrollability of worry
- Reducing client's feelings of urgency regarding engaging with the worry content.

Worry postponement is often prescribed as an exploratory or standalone intervention relatively early in the treatment of GAD (e.g. Leahy, Holland & McGinn, 2012). Wells (2004) describes an alternative approach whereby 'worry postponement experiments' are set up to test client beliefs regarding the uncontrollability of worry. Using this method the client is instructed to take regular belief ratings regarding the uncontrollability of worry across the course of the experiment.

Instructions

As described above a 'worry postponement' task can be used with differing rationales. In the original Borkovec et al. (1983) study worry postponement was prescribed as a 'treatment' which should be practiced daily for 3 weeks, with participants led to expect that it would reduce their experience of worry. Some treatment plans advise the use of worry postponement relatively early in the treatment of GAD. Wells (2004) describes a contrasting use of worry postponement in the form of a behavioral experiment where it is used to test client beliefs in the uncontrollability of worry. The *Worry Postponement* worksheet gives an overview of the technique, and can be used with either approach.

References

- Borkovec, T. D., Wilkinson, L., Folensbee, R., & Lerman, C. (1983). Stimulus control applications to the treatment of worry. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 21(3), 247-251.
- Leahy, R. L., Holland, S. J. F., McGinn, L. K. (2012). *Treatment plans and interventions for depression and anxiety disorders* (2nd edition). Guilford Press.
- Wells, A. (2004). A cognitive model of GAD: Metacognitions and pathological worry. In Heimberg, R. G., Turk, C. L., & Mennin, D. S. (Eds.), *Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Advances in Research and Practice*. Guilford Press.

Worry Postponement

Psychologists think that there are two types of worry:

1. Real event worries are about actual problems affecting you right now and which you can act on now.

“My toddler is reaching for something dangerous”; “I need to call my friend or she will think I have forgotten her birthday”

“I can’t find my keys”; “I can’t afford to pay this electricity bill”; “My boyfriend isn’t speaking to me”

2. Hypothetical worries are about things that do not currently exist, but which *might* happen in the future.

“What if my husband crashes the car when he drives to his parents?”; “Maybe this worrying is making me crazy”;

“I couldn’t stand if it my son liked playing dangerous sports when he’s older”

People who are bothered by worry often experience it as *uncontrollable*, time consuming, and believe that it is beneficial to engage in worry when it occurs. Experimenting with postponing your worries – deliberately setting aside some time in your day to do nothing but worry – is a helpful way of exploring your relationship with worry. Follow the steps below for *at least* one week.

Step 1: Preparation

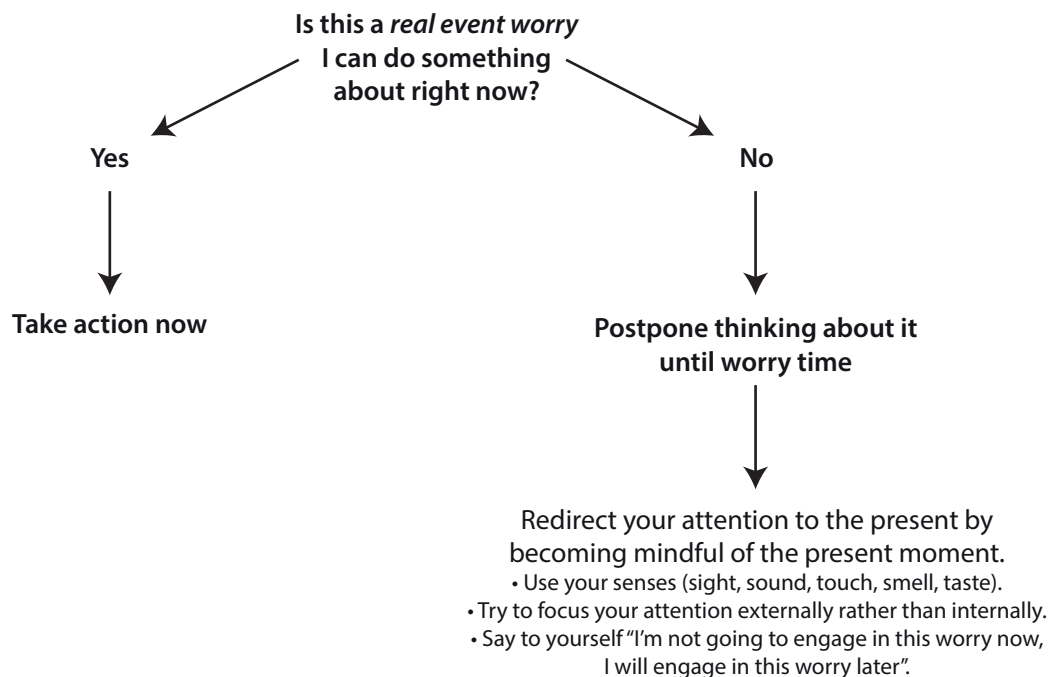
Decide **when** your worry time will be, and for **how long** it will be for.

- ‘Worry time’ is time you set aside every day for the specific purpose of worrying.
- What time of day do you think you will be in the best frame of mind to attend to your worries?
- When are you unlikely to be disturbed?
- If you are unsure, 15 to 30 minutes every day at 7:00pm is often a good starting point.



Step 2: Worry postponement

During the day, decide whether worries that surface are real event worries you can act on now, or whether they are hypothetical worries that need to be postponed.



Step 3: Worry time

Use your dedicated worry time for worrying. Consider writing down any of the hypothetical worries that you remember having had throughout the day. How concerning are they to you now? Are any of them the kinds of worries that can lead you to take practical actions?

- Try to use all of your allocated worry time, even if you do not feel that you have much to worry about, or even if worries do not seem as pressing at this time.
- Reflect upon your worries now – do they give you the same emotional ‘kick’ when you think about them now as they did when you first thought of them?
- Can any of your worries be converted into a practical problem to which you can look for a solution?

Psychology Tools develops and publishes evidence-based psychotherapy resources. We support mental health professionals to deliver effective therapy, whatever their theoretical orientation or level of experience.

Our digital library encompasses information handouts, worksheets, workbooks, exercises, guides, and audio skills-development resources.

Our tools are flexible enough to be used both in-session and between-session, and during all stages of assessment, formulation, and intervention. Written by highly qualified clinicians and academics, materials are available in digital and printable formats across a wide range of languages.



Resource details

Title: Worry Postponement

Type: Exercise

Language: English (US)

Translated title: Worry Postponement

URL: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/worry-postponement>

Resource format: Professional

Version: 20230721

Last updated by: JP

Terms & conditions

This resource may be used by licensed members of Psychology Tools and their clients. Resources must be used in accordance with our terms and conditions which can be found at: <https://www.psychologytools.com/terms-and-conditions/>

Disclaimer

Your use of this resource is not intended to be, and should not be relied on, as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. If you are suffering from any mental health issues we recommend that you seek formal medical advice before using these resources. We make no warranties that this information is correct, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. As a professional user, you should work within the bounds of your own competencies, using your own skill and knowledge, and therefore the resources should be used to support good practice, not to replace it.

Copyright

Unless otherwise stated, this resource is Copyright © 2023 Psychology Tools Limited. All rights reserved.