

Worry Break

What is the Worry Break Technique?

The Worry Break Technique (sometimes called Worry Scheduling) is a powerful cognitive behavioral tool designed to help people who struggle with chronic, looping anxiety.

Often, anxiety acts like an uninvited guest that follows you around all day, bleeding into your work, your relationships, and your downtime. When you try to force yourself not to worry, the anxiety usually just fights back harder. This technique helps you regain control by giving you a specific, designated time to worry purposefully, allowing you to postpone anxiety and stay present for the rest of your day.

Case Example: *"I'm Going to Drop the Ball"*

Mark, a busy manager, shared that he had been struggling with constant, low-level anxiety. From the moment he woke up until he went to bed, he found himself ruminating about unfinished tasks, emails, and upcoming meetings, leading to the constant thought, "I have too much to do and I'm going to drop the ball."

- **Therapist:** I'd like to show you a helpful tool called the Worry Break Technique. It might help with that constant feeling of dread about dropping the ball. Want to give it a try?
- **Mark:** Sure, but I don't know how to just turn off my anxiety.
- **Therapist:** That's the beauty of this tool.. we aren't going to turn it off. If I tell you *not* to think about a pink elephant right now, what happens?
- **Mark:** I instantly picture a pink elephant.
- **Therapist:** Exactly. Suppressing worry doesn't work. Instead of telling yourself *not* to worry, we are going to tell your brain *when* to worry. We are going to schedule a 15-minute "Worry Break" for 4:30 PM today. If a worry pops up at 10:00 AM, what could you do?
- **Mark:** I guess I would write it down and tell myself I'll worry about it at 4:30.
- **Therapist:** Spot on. You validate the worry, jot it down on a notepad, and postpone it. Then, at 4:30 PM, you sit down and give those worries your full, undivided attention.

After practicing the exercise for a week, Mark realized that he didn't have to be at the mercy of his anxiety all day. He found that by the time his scheduled Worry Break rolled around, many of the morning's intense worries had naturally faded and no longer felt urgent or threatening. He went on to acknowledge that compartmentalizing his anxiety allowed him to be much more present and productive throughout the day.

How You Can Use This Technique

Step 1. Choose a specific time and place for your daily Worry Break (e.g., 15 minutes at 4:00 PM at your desk). Try not to schedule it right before bed. Write your scheduled time and location down:

Step 2. Throughout the day, when you notice an anxious thought or worry creeping in, write it down on a piece of paper or in your phone. What is a specific worry you are dealing with today?

Step 3. Remind yourself that you are not ignoring the problem; you are simply postponing it. What can you say to yourself in the moment to gently delay the worry? (e.g., "This is important, and I will give it my full attention at 4:00 PM.") Remind yourself that you are not ignoring the problem; you are simply postponing it. What can you say to yourself in the moment to gently delay the worry?

Step 4. Execute the Worry Break. When your scheduled time arrives, set a timer for 10 to 15 minutes. Review your list. You can worry, problem-solve, or write out worst-case scenarios.

Step 5. When the timer goes off, the Worry Break is officially over. Put away your notes, get up, and transition to a new, engaging activity. What is a healthy, grounding activity you can do right after your Worry Break to shift your focus?

The Worry Break Technique is not about pretending you don't have stressors. It's about containing the anxiety to a specific window so that it doesn't contaminate the other 23 hours of your day.

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- **Keep It Brief:** Your Worry Break should ideally be between 10 and 20 minutes. Any longer, and you risk spiraling into unhelpful rumination. Set a hard stop using an alarm.
- **The Power of the Pen:** Writing down your worries as they happen is crucial. It acts as a "receipt" for your brain, reassuring it that the thought is safely stored and won't be forgotten.
- **Loss of Urgency:** You will often find that a worry that felt like an absolute emergency at 9:00 AM feels completely irrelevant by your 4:00 PM Worry Break. If you arrive at your scheduled time and don't feel like worrying, you get to skip it!
- **Don't Fight the Slip-Ups:** If you catch yourself worrying outside of your designated time, don't be critical of yourself. Gently notice it, write the thought down, and redirect your attention back to the present moment.

Final Note

Worry Break Technique teaches us a profound truth about anxiety: worry thrives in the background, feeding on our lack of boundaries. When we let anxiety interrupt us at any moment, we give it all the power. By drawing a clear line in the sand and inviting worry to sit down at a scheduled time, we strip away its urgency and its chaos. You teach yourself that you are capable of holding your fears without letting them hold you hostage, creating the necessary space to live your life on your own terms.