

# Stop Feeding Your Worry: Understand and Overcome Anxious Thinking Habits

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# Presentation Overview

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- Adaptive nature of foresight
- What is Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)?
- Why worry is worth addressing?
  - Scope of the problem
  - Impact
- Are there tests that measure GAD symptoms and severity of GAD?
- What causes GAD?
- What maintains GAD?
- Describe research on the most effective treatments for GAD
- Provide information about active ingredients in GAD treatment

## Poll #1: What brings you to this webinar?

- 1: I am looking for strategies for managing my own worry.
- 2: I am a mental health professional looking for strategies for helping the people I work.
- 3: I have a loved one who worries excessively and I am looking for ways to help them.
- 4: I am just interested in the topic.

# Adaptive nature of foresight

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- Being able to imagine the future is a superpower
- Being able to predict threats and plan accordingly has helped humans to survive
- **Worry definition** “Worry refers to the thoughts, images, emotions, and actions of a **negative nature** in a **repetitive, uncontrollable** manner that results from a proactive cognitive risk analysis made to avoid or solve anticipated potential threats and their potential consequences.” -Wikipedia
- Worry differs from adaptive foresight and problem solving in that it becomes repetitive, negatively skewed, excessive, and nonproductive.

# What is GAD?

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519704/table/ch3.t15/>

- Excessive worry plus excessive physiological arousal (sympathetic nervous system activation) for more than 6 months
- People with GAD worry about the same things that other people worry about, but more often and more intensely



# Why worry is worth addressing: Scope of the problem

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<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/generalized-anxiety-disorder>

- 6.8 million adults or 3.1% of the U.S. population
- Women experience GAD at twice the rate of men
- GAD is underrecognized and only 20%-32% of people with GAD get adequate treatment (Revicki et al., 2011).

# Impact of GAD

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- Significantly impacts quality of life (Berrera and Norton, 2010)
- Increases risk of depression (Hettema et al., 2006)
- Most people with GAD are worried much of the day most days
- GAD can lead to a feeling of never being able to relax
- Can be disabling and cause impairment in many areas of life
- GAD leads to increased medical costs





# Measuring worry

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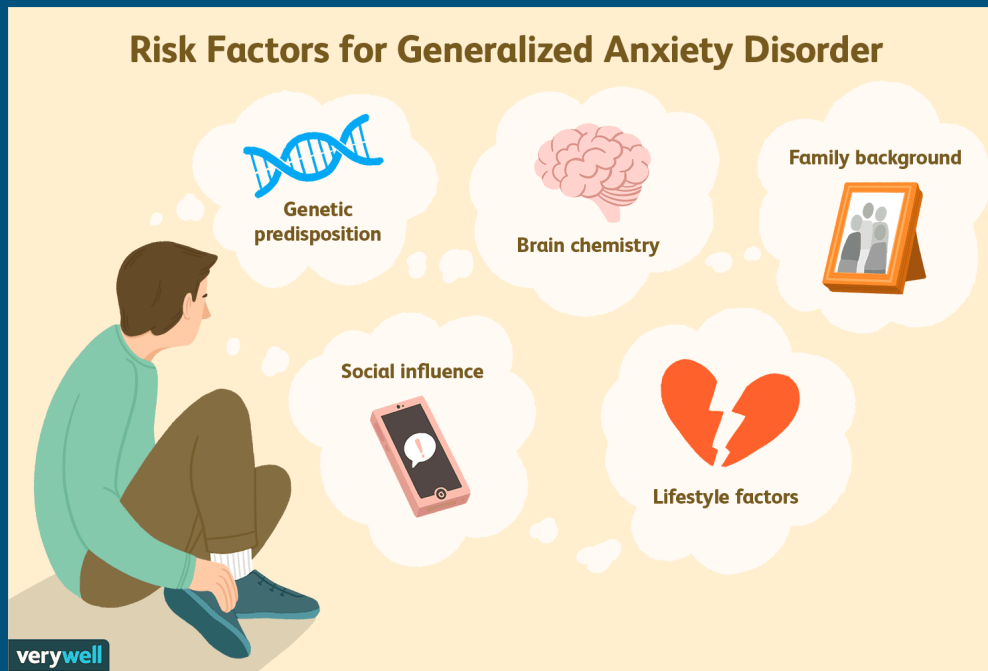
- GAD-7 [https://adaa.org/sites/default/files/GAD-7\\_Anxiety-updated\\_0.pdf](https://adaa.org/sites/default/files/GAD-7_Anxiety-updated_0.pdf)
- Scores of 5, 10, and 15 are cut offs for mild, moderate, and severe
- GAD-7 is easy to use, has excellent psychometrics, and can be used repeatedly to track changes in GAD symptoms with treatment
- GAD-7 scores in the clinical range (10 or higher) indicate that additional assessment is needed
- Clinically significant change is measured by a drop in score of 6 points and movement below the clinical cut off of 10

# Questions?

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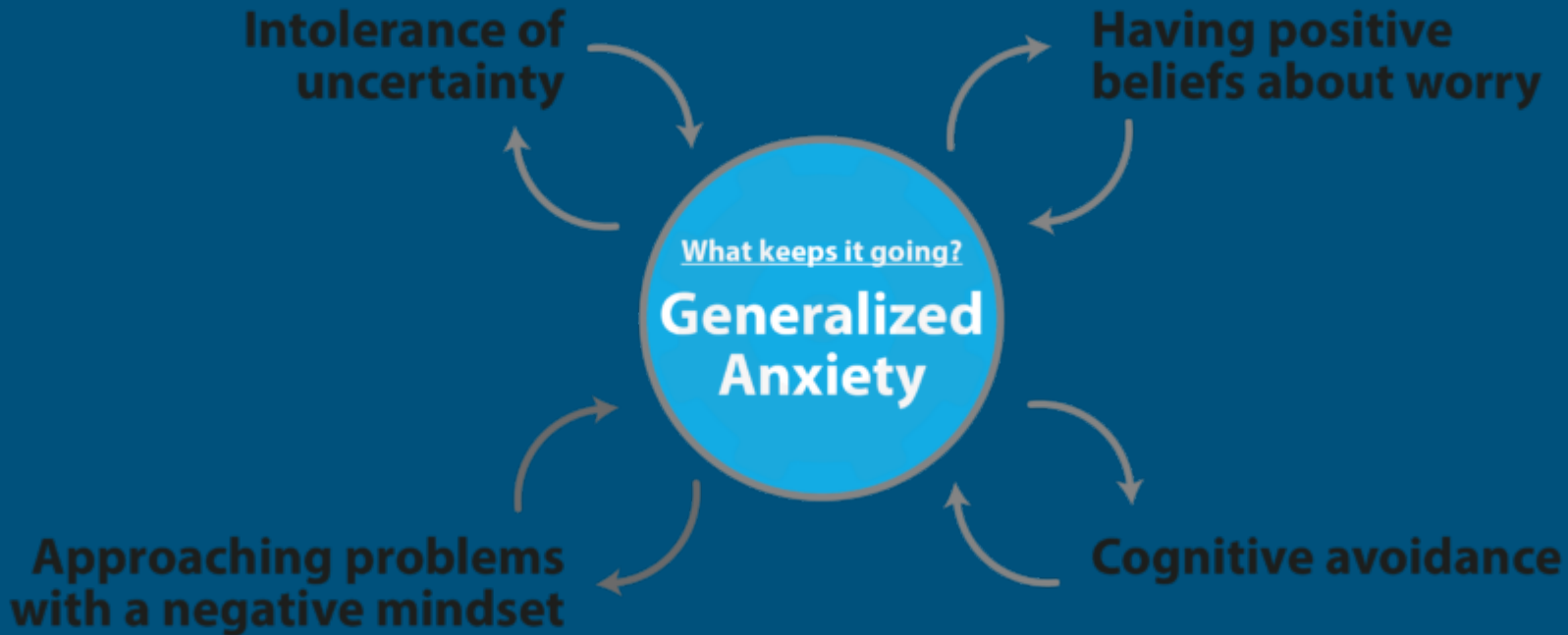
# Causes of GAD

- Life experiences
  - Medical history (hyperthyroidism)
  - Childhood trauma
  - Modeling
- Genetics
- Tendency towards avoidance
- Drug or alcohol abuse can increase risk
- Sedentary lifestyle increases risk



# What maintains worry?

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# Empirically supported treatments for GAD

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- CBT (Gold Standard) <https://div12.org/treatment/cognitive-and-behavioral-therapies-for-generalized-anxiety-disorder/>
- “Meta-analyses of randomized controlled trials of CBT for GAD consistently support its superiority for reducing anxiety and mood symptoms and improving quality of life post-treatment and long-term, compared to non-intervention and non-CBT control conditions. CBT trials demonstrate large effect sizes for the reduction of the core symptom of worry.”  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00796/full#:~:text=Meta%2Danalyses%20of%20randomized%20controlled,and%20non%2DCBT%20control%20conditions.>
- Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy
  - 8 week mindfulness training course that includes cognitive restructuring interventions
  - Found to be effective for treating GAD in a meta-analysis (Ghahari et al., 2020)

# Empirically supported treatments for GAD

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- Applied relaxation (Hayes-Skelton and Roemer, 2013).
- “Short-term psychotherapy is more effective than no therapy and at least as effective as antianxiety medicine without psychotherapy.” <https://www.health.harvard.edu/anxiety/generalized-anxiety-disorder>

# Questions?

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# Active ingredients

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- Psychoeducation about GAD
- Increasing awareness and acceptance of anxious thoughts (Mindfulness training)
- Increasing tolerance of uncertainty
- Worry scheduling and worry sorting
- Cognitive restructuring (balancing anxious thoughts)
- Eliminating maladaptive behaviors that maintain worry
- Practicing effective problem solving
- Worry exposure
- Relaxation training (PMR)
- Physical activity



# Mindfulness

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- Mental training (shifting mental spotlight to what is happening now)
- Present moment awareness without judgment
  - Being aware of anxious thoughts as “just thoughts” and not overidentifying with them
  - Not trying to force them to stop (“Leave your front door and your back door open. Let thoughts come and go. Just don’t serve them tea.” -Shunryu Suzuki)
  - Develop a curious and open awareness of your thoughts
  - Anchor your attention to something that is happening right now (breath, physical sensations, etc.)
  - When your mind wanders or goes into worry, bring it back to what is happening right now (repeat several billion times)

# Tolerating uncertainty

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GAD involves worrying about things that are unlikely, but possible. Many forms of anxiety can be seen as an allergy to uncertainty. We want to be 100% certain when this isn't needed and often isn't possible. In order to build up tolerance of uncertainty, we can

- Take small risks
- Try new things
- Practice acknowledging the high degree of uncertainty in life and sitting with the discomfort that this causes
- Be spontaneous
- Remind ourselves that we will likely be able to cope even if something bad happens

# Worry scheduling

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- Exactly what it sounds like
- Involves 3 skills
- Recognize/awareness, delay, and engaging in scheduled worry
- Worry time can be 20-30 minutes a day
- The other 23.5 hours, we are using mindfulness to notice and not engage with worry
- During worry time, we can practice looking at our worries more objectively and we can practice worry sorting

# Worry sorting

## Unproductive worry

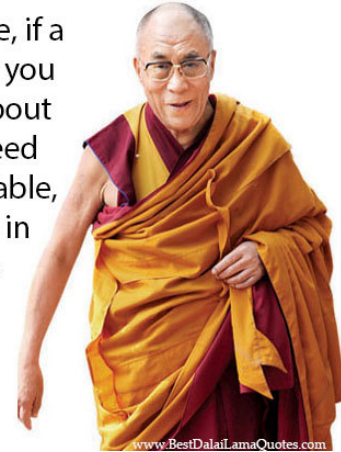
- Our thoughts/solutions are abstract and far away
- We have little control over the outcome
- We focus on the negative
- We don't accept imperfect solutions
- We want to be sure of what the outcome will be.
- We tend to exaggerate and overestimate threat
- We feel high levels of distresses

## Productive worry

- Our thoughts/solutions are realistic and immediate
- We have some control over the outcome
- We focus on problem solving
- We can tolerate imperfect solutions
- We can tolerate some risk and uncertainty
- We are aware there may be a range of outcomes
- We feel low levels of distress

"If a problem is fixable, if a situation is such that you can do something about it, then there is no need to worry. If it's not fixable, then there is no help in worrying. There is no benefit in worrying whatsoever."

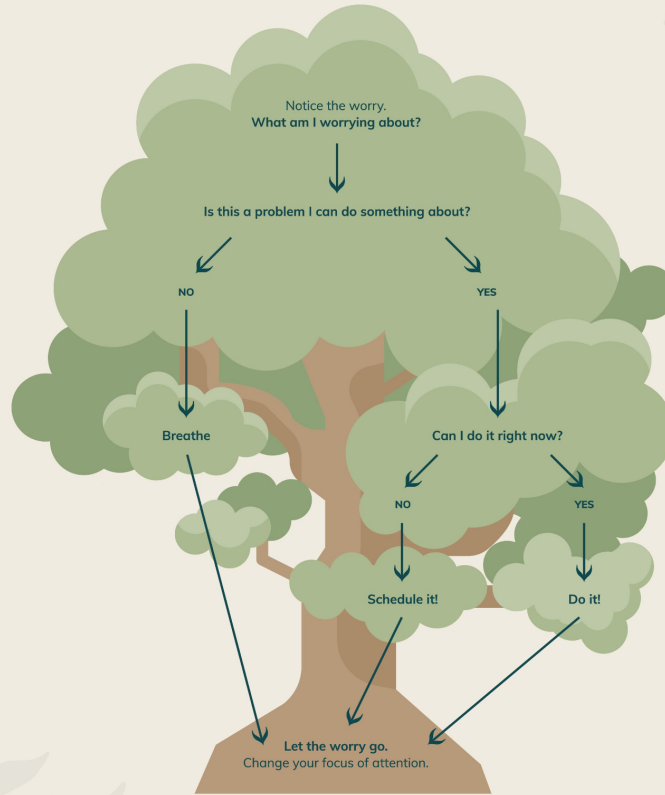
- His Holiness the Dalai Lama



<https://www.facebook.com/memindselfandi/>

# The Worry Tree

A useful guide to help you when you feel anxious from WorryTree.



# Cognitive restructuring

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GAD leads us to:

- Overpredict the likelihood of bad things happening
- Catastrophize (overpredict how bad it will be if it does happen)
- Underpredict our own ability to cope

Bad things will definitely happen, they will be catastrophic, and we won't be able to handle it.

# Cognitive restructuring



- Challenge maladaptive beliefs about worry and anxiety
  - If I feel anxious, I must be in danger
  - Worry prevents bad things from happening
  - Worry prepares me emotionally for bad things happening
  - Anxiety and stress is bad for you
- Practice realistic thinking about the likelihood of bad things happening
  - Magic of percentages
  - Look for real world examples or engage in behavioral experiments
- Practice realistic thinking about our ability to cope with bad outcomes

# Cognitive restructuring

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- Positive data log
  - Take notes on evidence that disproves negative thoughts and assumptions
  - Act as a detective of positive outcomes
  - Add a few items to the list every day
- Positive outcome imagery:
  - Identify a specific worry
  - Rate the likelihood of it happening (percentage)
  - Brainstorm ways the situation could turn out well
  - Imagine the situation turning out well in a specific way as if you were watching it happen
  - Close eyes and imagine the positive outcome for 2 minutes incorporating multiple senses
  - “This technique promotes attention to positive information, positive interpretations and concrete and specific positive outcome imagery of future worries.” (Hirsch et al, 2019)

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00796/full#:~:text=Meta%2Danalyses%20of%20randomized%20controlled,and%20non%2DCBT%20control%20conditions>



# Eliminating maladaptive behaviors

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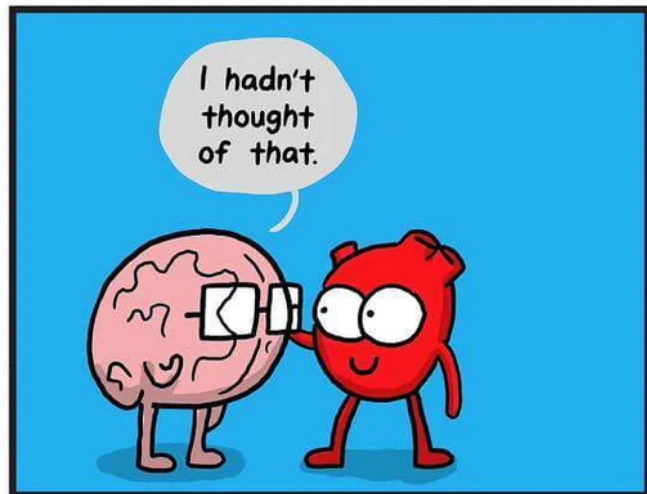
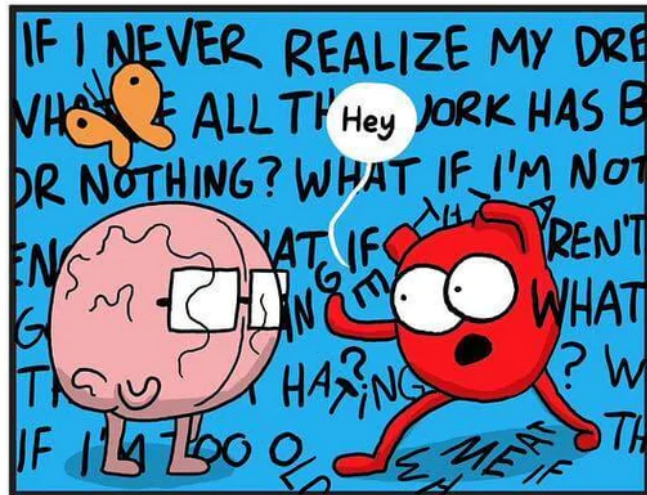
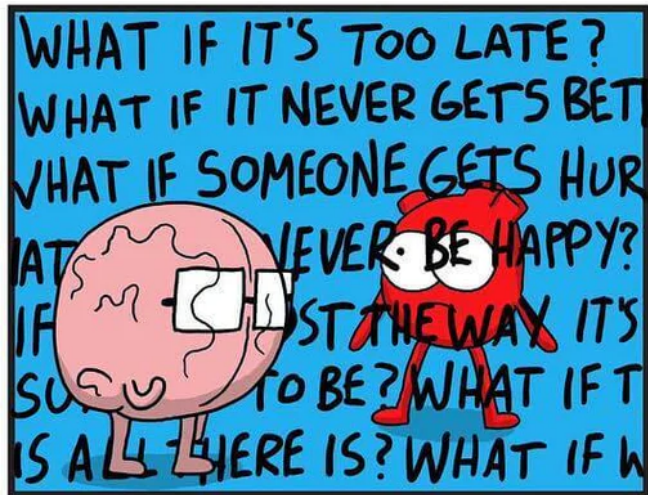
GAD is maintained by behaviors that reinforce worry. In CBT we help people to eliminate the following types of behavior

- Cyclical reassurance seeking
- Checking behaviors
- Avoidance behaviors (often involves the use of in vivo exposure)
- Procrastination
- Unnecessary safety behaviors
- Escape behaviors

All of these behaviors reinforce anxiety by making us feel better in the short term, but keeping us feeling worried and anxious in the long-term by reinforcing our fears.

Ultimately, we want to base our behaviors on values and logic rather than emotional reasoning.

EDBs versus VDBs.



# Practicing effective problem solving

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<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/~media/CCI/Consumer-Modules/What-Me-Worry/What-Me-Worry---07---Problem-Solving.pdf>

# Worry exposure (Imaginal exposure)

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- Procedure
  - Develop a fear hierarchy
  - Use gradual exposure
  - Intentionally think about the feared event
  - Be as specific as possible
  - Imagine the feared scenario intensely (using vivid imagery) and resist the urge to push the worry away or to try to do anything about it
  - Focus on the feared outcome for 25 minutes or until distress decreases significantly
  - Stick with the same image/event until it no longer causes significant anxiety
  - Repeat at least once daily
  - Can use imagery from newspapers and other sources to increase intensity
- Benefits
  - Desensitizes us to worry
  - Increases control of worry
  - We get to practice avoiding behaviors that maintain worry

# Poll #2

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Do you practice physical relaxation on a consistent (more than twice a week) basis?

1: Yes

2: No

# Relaxation training

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- Most aspects of the stress response are automatic
- Breathing and muscle tension are two pieces of this response that we can use as a manual override or emergency brake
- 4-7-8 breathing is a pattern that quickly reverses the anxiety response
- Progressive muscle relaxation trains our body to relax in a way that allows the mind to become less worried and more calm
- Starts with a practice that takes about 10 minutes, but with daily training, we can learn to relax our bodies in under a minute
- Incredibly effective and underutilized
- Feels good the first time that you do it and feels better and better the more that you do it
- Leads to decreased muscle tension, heart rate, and a decrease in worry

# Physical Activity

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- Physical activity can help to improve mood and reduce anxiety
- Even a small amount of low intensity exercise helps significantly (10 minute walk)
- Physically active people have lower rates of anxiety and depression than people who are more sedentary
- Not everyone with anxiety benefits from exercise, but most do
- Do something that you enjoy for physical activity
- Consistency is more important than intensity
- <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18723899/>
- “Our data suggest that exercise is effective in improving anxiety symptoms in people with a current diagnosis of anxiety and/ or stress-related disorders. Taken together with the wider benefits of exercise on wellbeing and cardiovascular health, these findings reinforce exercise as an important treatment option in people with anxiety/ stress disorders.” (Stubbs et al., 2017)

# Questions?

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# Resources

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- Free 8-week self-guided mindfulness course: <https://palousemindfulness.com/>
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGIWXiu4vLA>
- Find an MBCT training program in your area or get trained to lead MBCT <https://www.mbct.com/finding-an-mbct-program/>
- Make stress your friend TED talk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcGyVTAoXEU&t=570s>

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# Contact

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Worrying won't stop the  
bad stuff from happening,  
it just stops you from  
enjoying the good.

