Fear about... everything (managing an overactive imagination)  [1]

Dear Alice,

How do you deal with your fears? I have a fear of other people dying or of myself and others getting a disease. My imagination runs wild with these thoughts, and it's hard to control these worries. I'm always thinking "what if." My friends tell me not to worry unless it actually happens. I know this is true and good advice, but I find it hard to stop worrying. If you could give me some tips on how to control my imagination, it would be much appreciated.

? worrywart

Answer

Dear worrywart,

Your question about fear is certainly a valid one, given the challenges presented by the increasingly complex world in which we live. Examining the root causes of your worry can help you find ways to prevent your apprehension from negatively affecting your life. Here are some questions to ask yourself, and discuss with a trusted friend, mentor, or counselor:

- When did these fears start?
- Do they seem to worsen or ease depending on other circumstances in my life?
- Are other people experiencing similar reactions?
- Are my fears getting in the way of my ability to go on with my normal activities?

Many people find that imagining worst-case scenarios and worrying a lot helps them to feel more in control. Playing out the many possible situations that could occur can help people feel as if they'd be prepared if they actually needed to cope or take action. Some have learned to do this in response to life events that felt scary and overwhelming, especially during childhood. Others have picked up these habits by spending time with parents or other family members or close friends who used these mental strategies to cope with their own anxieties. In some cases, focusing on catastrophic fears serves as a distraction from more mundane concerns about school or job performance, relationships, or many other responsibilities.

In reaction to real catastrophic events, vividly imagined scenes of destruction and intense fear can be a normal, and even realistic, response. Perhaps knowing that your reaction is not an uncommon one can help to ease the anxiety you feel about your anxiety... using some of the
following strategies may help as well:

- Accept your various emotions and find healthy ways to express them—through writing, listening to music, talking with friends and colleagues, or being physically active.
- Stick to a regular schedule. Rest and sleep, eat nutritious meals and snacks, and try to continue doing the things you need to, such as going to work, shopping for food, and cleaning your home.
- Take time out to do things you enjoy and that provide you with a sense of internal peace. Meditating, gardening, dancing, sewing, cooking, making home repairs, playing with pets, or spending time outdoors work for a lot of people.
- Volunteer for causes that you care about. Being able to contribute in a meaningful way may help you focus on what can be accomplished rather than always being concerned about the "what if."
- Continue practicing comforting spiritual or cultural rituals—or developing new ones with family and friends. These are helpful for many people, and can be as simple as a weekly potluck dinner, listening to a favorite song each night before bed, or reciting a meaningful poem or prayer.
- Set new realistic goals for yourself that will help you feel focused and a sense of accomplishment. This may mean re-prioritizing or delegating certain tasks, or concentrating on repetitive duties, such as filing, re-organizing a closet, or paying bills.
- Stay connected with those you care about. Use e-mail, the telephone, texting, video chat, and even old-fashioned mail to express what you're feeling and get the support you need.

If you find that your worries are intrusive, don't ease with time, or affect your ability to fulfill your responsibilities and feel at ease, the help of a trained mental health professional may be a wise next step. Many people even find that even a few visits can help them put their anxieties into perspective and learn some new strategies for resilience [4] and coping. Or, if your vivid imagination and worrying habits are more entrenched, some on-going work, and possibly even medication, can help you to smooth out your worrywart tendencies.

In a lot of ways, having a vivid imagination is a great gift. It can allow you to create a positive vision for your life, spur creativity, spice things up with fantasy, and provide an escape when life feels dull or frustrating. Maybe you can transform your active imagination from one that imagines the worst to one that focuses on the good in the world and what each of us can do to work for peace.

Take care,

Alice!

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Resources

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