

7 Steps to Worry-Free Living

Two friends, Joe and Sam, who hadn't seen each other for some time, met on the street.

Joe: 'How are things?'

Sam: 'I have a mountain of credit card debt, I've lost my job, last week my car was stolen, and now our house is about to be repossessed, but I'm not worried about any of it. You see, I've hired a professional worrier. He does all my worrying for me, and that way I don't even have to think about it.'

'That's fantastic!' Joe said. 'How much does your professional worrier charge for his services?'

'Fifty thousand a year.'

'Fifty thousand a year? Where are you going to get that kind of money?'

'I don't know. That's his worry.'

Worry is like a rocking chair. It will give you something to do, but it won't get you anywhere!

Worry is everywhere. All of us worry, including me. You aren't alone. In fact, 38% of people worry every day. And many people describe themselves as chronic worriers -- they say, "I've been a worrier all my life." But that's only a modest indication of how worry has come to impact every aspect of our lives, limiting our enjoyment and satisfaction. Worry is the central component of many anxiety disorders and depression. Research shows that worry precedes the onset of depression -- you literally worry yourself into depression. Fifty percent of the people in the United States have had serious problems with depression, anxiety or substance abuse at some time. And here's a depressing piece of news: Depression, anxiety and substance abuse have increased during the past 50 years.

Jews certainly aren't immune for worrying. Have you heard of a 'Jewish telegram'? It reads: *Worry now, details to follow*

For a moment or two, let's put aside our worries and discuss *7 Steps to Worry-Free Living*

1. Positive Thinking

A man attending a business convention in Las Vegas decided to spend the evening 'observing' the events on the casino floor. Tempted by the opportunity to make it big, he placed a two-dollar bet at the roulette table. His number won. He continued betting and winning. Within a short time, he had accumulated \$500,000 in winnings.

Thrilled with his good mazal, he made his way to the cashier. Before reaching the window, he felt the urge to bet one more time. He went back to the roulette table and put down his entire winnings on 14 red. The wheel spun round and round and finally stopped on12 black. His entire winnings were lost. The man turned from the table and made his way back to the hotel room.

"Well," his wife asked, "did you bet any money?"

"Sure did."

"How did you do?"

"Not bad," he said. "I lost two dollars."

Now *that* is a positive attitude.

"But," you'll say, "this is just a matter of semantics". No, it's a process of conditioning our minds to focus on the positive rather than the negative. I'm convinced that with the right attitude you can be happy and grateful with a crust of bread.

A positive attitude can be seen in the words of a New York City cabbie who said, "It's not the work that I enjoy so much, but it's the people I run into."

On the flip side, you can be as wealthy as Bill Gates or Howard Hughes and be absolutely miserable.

Where does worry come from?

Realize: It's not things that MAKE you worry. You make yourself worry. Have you ever found yourself saying, "You make me worry?" or, "That makes me worry?"

Worry is when you choose from millions of possible thoughts, only a few which deal with a potential misfortune or problem. Once you accept your worrying as the act of choosing specific thoughts, you can consciously make an effort to avoid those thoughts that cause you needless pain and choose more constructive, positive thoughts.

Let's explore the psychology of worry.

-- When you evaluate and tell yourself something is negative, awful, tragic, or a misfortune, you will feel sad, depressed, miserable, angry, or full of anxiety. Eggplant & mushrooms for lunch -- oh my!

-- When you think that something doesn't affect you in any way are are apathetic to it, you will feel neutral. Blue tablecloths? I don't care, one way or the other.

-- When you evaluate something as good for you, you will react with happiness or joy. I just found some long-lost family photos -- Wow!

Imagine two tape recorders (remember those?) in front of you. One tape has a positive, affirming message. The second tape has a dispiriting message. Why choose to press the button on the recorder that has the discouraging, worrisome message? You can choose what tape you listen to.

A man lived on the border between Wisconsin and Minnesota. He assumed he lived in Minnesota, but a new survey showed that he lived in Wisconsin. "Boruch Hashem," he said. I could never take those cold Minnesota winters."

There are three forms of positive "Self-Talk" that can reduce and minimize worry.

1) *Optimism*

We all know the case of the half full/ half empty glass.

The optimist says: "The glass is half-full." The pessimist says: "The glass is half-empty". And while they are arguing, the pragmatist takes the glass and drinks it!

What does the worrier do? The worrier frets that the remaining half will evaporate by next morning.

I have frequently found that pessimists say to optimists, "You aren't being realistic." But this is a misconception with serious consequences. If a glass is large enough to hold 16 ozs. and it contains 8 ozs., what is the reality? The reality is -- it contains 8 ounces. Nevertheless, some will say it is half full and some will say it is half empty. As regards the reality, both views are correct.

Nevertheless, some choose to be grateful for the water they have, and others choose to be bothered by what they do not have. This familiar example holds true for all aspects of life. We constantly choose what we will focus on and how we will view it. It is harmful to rigidly consider reality in a counterproductive way, when you can choose a positive perspective of looking at things.

Many of the Jewish soldiers facing Goliath said, "He's gigantic! There's no way we can kill him."

David, facing Goliath, said, "He's gigantic! There's no way I can miss him."

Your emotions depend on your perspective. Be optimistic.

2) *The Percentage Game*

Mark Twain said: *My life has been filled with calamities, some of which actually happened.* There seems to be nothing more fictitious than the worry that goes on in our heads -- and there's a study that proves it.

Researchers at the University of Cincinnati found that eight-five percent (yes - 85%) of what we worry about *never happens*. Moreover, the study found that 79% of us handle the 15% that does happen in ways that surprise us with our ability to turn the situation around.

If thoughts of worry creep into your head, realize that the percentages for a positive outcome are in your favor.

3) *Set aside a designated "worry time."*

Instead of worrying all day, every day, designate a 30-minute period of time where you can think about your problems.

Penn State researchers found in a 2011 study that a four-step stimulus control program could help seriously stressed people take control of their anxieties.

Step one: Identify the object of worry.

Step two: Come up with a time and place to think about said worry.

Step three: If you catch yourself worrying at a time *other* than your designated worry time, you must make a point to think of something else.

Step four: Use your "worry time" productively by thinking of solutions to the worries.

J. Arthur Rank had a system for doing that. He was one of the early pioneers of the film industry in Great Britain. Rank found he could not push his worries out of his mind completely; they were always slipping back in. So he finally made a deal with G-d to limit his worrying to Wednesday. He even made himself a little Wednesday Worry Box and he placed it on his desk. Whenever a worry cropped up, Rank wrote it out and dropped it into the Wednesday Worry Box.

Would you like to know his amazing discovery? When Wednesday rolled around, he would open that box to find that only a third of the items he had written down were still worth worrying about. The rest had managed to resolve themselves.

Conclusion:

We can choose to focus on the negative, exacerbating our worries -- like the sign on the gymnasium ceiling during a wrestling meet: "If you're reading this, you're losing."

On the other other hand, a positive perspective works wonders to reduce worry. George Shearing, the blind jazz pianist, when he was asked if he had been blind all his life, simply answered, "Not yet."

Harness the power of positive thinking to achieve a worry-free life.

2) Prayer

The Pope and Prime Minister Netanyahu decided to share reciprocal visits. When Bibi was at the Vatican he noticed a red phone.

"Pope, what's with the red phone?"

"Mr. P.M., it's a hotline to G-d -- pick it up. G-d is on the other end, and you can talk with him."

"Let me give it a try. "

After a brief chat on the phone, and the Prime Minister got through to the Almighty, the Pope said,

"I hope you enjoyed your chat. We'll be sending a bill to the Israeli government for \$100,000."

"Wow! Why so expensive?"

"It's not easy to arrange a direct phone call to G-d."

Upon the Pope's visit to Jerusalem, the Pope noticed a blue and white phone in Bibi's residence.

"Mr. P.M., what's with the blue and white phone?"

"Pope, it's a hotline to G-d."

"Let me give it a try."

"By the way, we'll be sending a bill to the Vatican for 4 shekel -- about 25 cents."

"Wow! Why so cheap?"

"From here, it's a local call."

We not only have a blue & white phone -- but a secret weapon. The Torah identifies the unique strength of the Jewish people as our voice -- our voice, raised in prayer to G-d. " *...ha'kol, kol Yaakov, v'ha'yadaim y'day Esav.*" (Gen 22:27) "The voice, is the voice of Jacob.."

Psychiatry increasingly recognizes the power of prayer and the importance of religious commitment and belief in people's lives. Arthur Kornhaber, a nationally known child psychiatrist, often includes prayer in his sessions with troubled adolescents. "To exclude G-d from psychiatric consultation," says Kornhaber, "is a form of malpractice for some patients. Spirituality is wonder and joy, and shouldn't be left in the clinical closet."

Prayer is a weapon that works to protect us against many things, including against worry. There are four ways prayer 'cuts through' worry.

1) *Prayer works. I get answers.*

Mark Twain said, "I don't know of a single foreign product that enters this country untaxed, except the answer to prayer." But we really don't need Twain to tell us that Hashem answers our prayers; we know it from our own experience. Have you ever even once had the experience of having a prayer answered? If your answer is 'yes', you're not alone.

In a recent Newsweek article, "*Is G-d Listening*", 79% of respondents say that G-d answers prayers for healing someone with an incurable disease, and 87% say that G-d answers prayers at least some of the time.

Americans know that prayer works. Our rabbis tell us that prayer works -- Tshuva, tefilla & tzedaka destroy the evil decree. And you know that prayer works, from your own experiences in life. 4 out of 5 people in America say that G-d answers their prayers. Prayer can make a difference, and prayer works!

2) *Prayer changes my perspective.*

A woman proudly hung on her mantelpiece a needlework plaque that said, "Prayer Changes Things". A few days later, the plaque was missing from its place. The woman asked her husband if he had seen it. "I took it down, I didn't like it," her husband said.

"But why?" the woman asked. "Don't you believe that prayer changes things?"

"Yes I really do," her husband answered. "But it just so happens that I don't like change, so I took it down."

Ralph Waldo Emerson: "No man ever prayed heartily without learning something" Sincere prayer is an act of introspection, which then becomes an instrument for change. There's a difference between the Hebrew word *tefila* and English word *pray*. *Tefila*, from the infinitive *l'hitpalel*, means to examine and judge oneself. *Pray* originates from an old word that means *to ask*. Quite a difference, isn't it? While standing in the presence of Hashem, we examine our values and desires. Sincere prayer distances our desires from honor and material things as central priorities in our lives.

3) *Prayer changes me*

We live in a self-centered, hedonistic world. Many people listen to only one radio station: WII -- FM -- What's In It For Me. A young man was once asked, "What's worse, ignorance or apathy?" His response: "I don't know, and I don't care."

Proper prayer creates a transformation; I become a more caring, spiritually sensitive, selfless person. And what that occurs my priorities change, alleviating many worries.

4) *Prayer Comforts Me*

When we study Torah, G-d talks to me.

When I pray, I talk to G-d.

Two-way communication is essential in any relationship. Prayer helps to establish and renew my relationship with the Almighty. Whether through reciting Psalms, the Amidah (Silent Devotion) or a spontaneous informal prayer, I'm comforted speaking to G-d and knowing He is listening.

In conclusion:

The story is told of a young man who once drove his bicycle off the side of a cliff, but on the way down grabbed an overhanging branch growing out from the cliff side. He called out, "Help! Is anyone out there?"

The clouds parted, and a booming voice called out, "Yes, it's Me -- G-d. I'm here to save you. Let go of the branch, and I'll catch you."

At that, the young man again looked upward and called out, "Is there anyone else out there?"

Maybe we're just temporarily out of touch with G-d. Get in touch with G-d..and ourselves ...and eliminate worry.

3) Count Your Blessings, Not Your Troubles

The story is told of a peasant in a small European village who had a recurring dream that a grand treasure was buried underneath a bridge in the city of Prague. Over the objections of his wife and family,

the peasant traveled for many days and finally came upon the bridge he had seen in his dreams. However, a police officer suspicious of the peasant's activities asked him why he was loitering near the bridge. When the peasant told the officer his story, the officer laughed and said, "You foolish man. I, too, have had a recurring dream. In my dream, a peasant looking exactly like you lived in a certain village, and in his own backyard is buried a fantastic treasure!" The officer then chased the peasant away, warning him not to return near the bridge, and advising him to return to his village. In the end, the peasant returned home, began to dig in his own backyard -- and found a fabulous treasure.

Like the peasant in that story, you also have a great treasure right in your back yard :The treasure of happiness, peace of mind, and worry-free living. Where is this treasure? Within us.

Each of us has the ability to control and direct our thoughts, which can lead to peace, courage, hope, health, restful sleep and happiness.

Don't sell yourself short when it comes to happiness. It is our right as Americans to be happy! Doesn't the Declaration of Independence say:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of an iPhoneI mean, pursuit of Happiness.

With greater significance, in Judaism we say, '*Mitzvah g'dolah li'yos b'simcha*' -- '*It's a great mitzvah to be happy*'

But how does happiness prevent worry? Let me suggest two answers

1) *From Dale Carnegie's 'How to Stop Worrying and Start Living'*

- *Crowd worry out of your mind by keeping busy. Plenty of action is one of the best therapies ever devised for curing "wibber gibbers. If you and I don't keep busy- if we sit around and brood- we will hatch out a whole flock (of) 'wibber gibbers'(that) are not but old-fashioned gremlins that will run us hollow and destroy our power of action and our power of will."*

It's been a while since I've heard anyone refer to a gremlin -- the ugly 1970's car, or otherwise -- but I think we get Carnegie's point. The mind is a vacuum. Fill it with good vibes to keep the gremlins and worries away.

2) *From Psalm 34*

'Sur May'Rah v'Oseh Tov -- *Turn away from Evil and do Good*

There's a residual benefit to being happy; it causes worry, anxiety, depression to atrophy.

In football parlance, this is an 'end-around'. The indirect approach of focusing on happiness can cause our worries to wither away and disappear. Inoculate yourself against worries with regular injections of happiness.

What is happiness, and how can we get it? We live with a myth: Things make us happy. The antidote to this fallacious thinking is found in a succinct and incredibly powerful statement in classic Jewish thought.

"Who is wealthy? The one who rejoices in their own portion." (Ethics of the Fathers 4:1)

Count your blessings. It's not how much you've got, but how much enjoyment you get from what you've got that counts. Focusing on what you don't have -- or what someone else has -- will make you miserable. But counting your blessings brings happiness, and removes worry.

A 2006 General Social Survey interviewed more than 27,000 Americans about job satisfaction and general happiness. Three occupations—clergy, firefighters and special education teachers—topped both the job-satisfaction and overall happiness lists. Roofers made it on the bottom of both charts, with just 14 percent of roofers surveyed reporting they were very happy.

Why roofers? They're subject to getting a bad case of shingles. On occasion, charged for illegal eavesdropping. They're always biting their nails

"The most satisfying jobs are mostly professions, especially those involving caring for, teaching and protecting others and creative pursuits," said Tom Smith, director of the above-mentioned General Social Survey.

What's your job 'Happiness score'? Happy people worry less than others.

There exists a second path to happiness

When I was a kid, we used to try to outdo each other in many ways. One way was to see who could come up with the longest word. *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* (34 letters) usually took the prize -- until one wise guy came up with *Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis* (45 letters -- longest word in a major dictionary).

However, of all the words in the English language, the HARDEST to pronounce are ...'thank you.'

We're not very good at saying thank you, are we? We're like a little boy I heard about. On his return from a birthday party, his mother asked, "Jimmy, did you thank the lady for the party?"

"Well, I was going to. But a girl ahead of me said, 'Thank you,' and the lady told her not to mention it. So I didn't."

A study conducted by Emmons and McCullough recruited adults who had certain types of neuromuscular disorders. While not life-threatening, these conditions were seriously debilitating, causing joint and muscle pain as well as muscle atrophy. People with this condition have a good reason to be dissatisfied with the hand life has dealt them.

In this study a 'gratitude condition' was compared to a control condition in which participants wrote about their daily experience. In other words, some were asked to focus specifically on things they had to be thankful for.

After the 21 day study the authors said:

Participants in the gratitude condition were found to be more satisfied with their lives overall, more optimistic about the upcoming week and crucially, were sleeping better..... People who sleep well are generally healthier and happier than those whose sleep is poor.

So, if you want to chase away your worries,

1) Count your blessings

2) Keep a gratitude journal, send thank-you notes and cards, and consistently acknowledge and appreciate the people who make a difference in your life.

Seek your treasure. Count your blessings, not troubles. Remember the jingle, "*Call Roto-Rooter, that's the name, and away go troubles down the drain!*" ? Count your blessings and regularly express gratitude, and your worries will disappear.