

FYI: AUGUST 2011
WHY WE WORRY
By Jean Mueller



We all feel it; that knot in our stomach, the tension in our neck, the headache, the fatigue, or that vague restlessness. On any given day, some of these feelings may invade our bodies and try to direct our actions. The newspaper or evening news casts are full of worrisome events. We all know that worry can contribute to poor health and a variety of other conditions, but where does all of this worry come from? Is there anything we can do to prevent it? Those are the things I would like to explore in this newsletter- to gain some insight into this strong emotion and to see if there are ways to manage the amount of worrying we do.

In preparation for this newsletter, I found several articles dedicated to worry and anxiety. The more I read about this topic, the more I became convinced that **worrying is a choice**. We may be so used to this emotion that we don't even acknowledge it. When I was younger one of my older sisters would call me each time she heard an ambulance siren- just to make sure my family was safe. It was not even a conscious decision, she automatically called. At the time I felt it was being overprotective, now I think how sad it was that she lived in constant fear something bad would happen. She has certainly struggled through far too many sleepless nights in her life!

Earlier this year I attended a training titled "The Immune System: The Mind-Body Connection Who Gets Sick and Who Stays Well." The seminar was presented by a brilliant

man named Nick Hall, Ph.D. He is the director of the Center for Psychoneuroimmunology at the University of South Florida. In his presentation he said "when we compare people who are well vs. people who are ill, **those who do the worst** are the ones who perceive they have **no control** and **lack a sense of hopefulness**." I believe this also relates to worry. When we don't have control of a situation, when we don't have all of the information about something, and when we can't see a hopeful future, what is left but to fret and worry? Fear and worry involve an inability to predict what will happen next, and to plan how we will respond. When you think about this, it makes sense. **Worry is associated with our perceived lack of control or information**. In contrast, when we know what to expect we can predict how to respond. Worry and anxiety are minimized because we can plan a response to a situation.

That sounds great, but the reality is we are human beings and we can't know everything. There are things that will always cause us to worry. The danger is when the worry takes over our rational thoughts. We become obsessed with the worry and that is when worry can cause health problems. So how do we become worry free, or at least worry less? Here are some suggestions:¹

¹ Hall, Nick R.S. Ph.D. "The Immune System: Who Gets Sick and Who Stays Well", Seminar May 13, 2011, Madison Wisconsin.

1. **Write things down.** I find that when I put thoughts, feelings, fears, or disappointments on paper, they have less power over my thought process. I have let them out and they are not dominating my thoughts. This works very well if you are worried about remembering something. Writing it down eliminates the worry- you now know that you have an appointment at 10:00 a.m. and you won't have to wake up during the night with it on your mind.

2. **Pay attention to your thoughts- and challenge the ones that are founded upon a worry.** That is, catch yourself worrying about something and then ask yourself, what is it that I am really worried about? It might not be an event itself, but the consequences of the event. I'll give you an example; a daughter might worry about her parent's failing health. Chances are that the real worry is not so much about the failing health, but about the consequences of the failing health. Will they be able to care for themselves? Will they need to move to a more supportive environment? Do they have their "affairs" in order? When you break it down the elements of worry become more manageable. If ailing parents can't care for themselves, research home care options, if the health concerns lead you to believe that moving to a more supportive environment might be a better choice- research the options you have and the related costs. Are the affairs in order? Do the parents have a living will, health care and financial power of attorney, if not this is a great time to create those documents. Taking specific actions to each of the triggers of worry can eliminate much of the feelings of helplessness.

3. **Exercise.** Every emotion creates energy and energy needs to be "spent." There are many benefits to exercise but one of the most beneficial is that exercise can help to reduce stress. Even taking a long walk can often clear your head of unwanted thoughts and unnecessary worry. Exercise of any kind is a conditioned response. When we exercise we are actually stressing our bodies and then training it to recover.

4. **Talk it out.** Sharing worries with a trusted friend is similar to writing it down. Talking it out can also be in the form of a prayer, such as:

St. Teresa's Prayer:

May today there be peace within.
May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.
May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.
May you use those gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you...
May you be content knowing you are a child of God...
Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love.
It is there for each and every one of us.

5. **Or, Escape....** Change your routine, change your scenery. Physically altering our daily routine changes our thought process. We may find we are less obsessed with day to day events that cause worry.

Here's to finding a place with more peace and less worry!!

