

## Section One

# Stop, Understand





## Chapter 1

# The Big Deal About Worry



If you're reading this book and you're from what is often described as the developed free world, let me ask you some questions:

How does it feel to be one of the wealthiest people to have ever lived on this planet?

How does it feel to know your life expectancy is higher than any other generation that's ever been born?

How does it feel to have the opportunity to travel and discover more of life's riches in a week than most people previously had in a lifetime?

Now let me ask you another question:

Why on earth, given the above, would anyone need to worry, feel anxious or suffer from stress?

But the fact is we do.

Some argue that our mental wellbeing has never been as fragile as it is now. Newspapers scream headlines of a stress epidemic. Doctors' waiting rooms are full of people suffering less from tangible physical ailments but more from psychological ones.

And despite the current economic gloom, the reality is

we've never had it so good

and yet

we've never felt so bad.

How come?

If you were born in 1900 your life expectancy was around 46. (And if you were born that year then congratulations on living

so long – but what possessed you to buy this book?) If you were born in 2003 your life expectancy is now over 80 years.

Good, eh?

Materially we've never had such prosperity. And that's despite the economic turbulence of the last few years.

Technology has transformed our lives. And yes, although it can always be used to bring destruction, in most cases it's used to bring hope, help and convenience to millions of lives.

In a nutshell we're the healthiest and wealthiest generation that's ever lived.

And

we're worrying more.

Survey after survey reports both stress and depression levels are rising.

The medical profession continues to dispense pills and potions at an alarming rate in order to rectify or at least dampen down our anxiety. And now there are even calls for children to be screened for anxiety disorders to prevent them developing mental problems in later life.

In a generation where an overwhelming sense of gratitude should be our defining emotion it seems fear in all its various guises is actually more pervasive.

Strange, isn't it?

But however strange it may be, it's a reality.

This is no half-baked conspiracy theory.

Worry, stress, anxiety or whichever label you prefer to use are real issues.

Not only are they real issues but they have real consequences.

Consequences that ultimately impact not only our lives but also the lives of others around us.

It's a big deal.

With serious implications.

### *So what do we mean by worry?*

My friend Stephanie was curious to know about the book I'm writing. When I mentioned it was on the subject of worry, she replied, 'Oh I don't need to read that – I never worry, it's not in my make up. I get stressed at times and occasionally feel anxious about stuff, but I never worry.'

Well, whatever label you use to describe your emotions, be it worry, stress, nerves or anxiety, they all seem to have common themes. All of them imply a lack of emotional wellbeing to some degree or another.

However, like the words 'love' or 'God' they're often used liberally and without any thought about their real meaning. They're words which mean different things to different people. But as you'd expect, people are not about to sit down and analyze or unpack what they specifically mean. The person experiencing some form of emotional turmoil is unlikely to embark upon the following conversation:

*'I'm really worried about my son's exam results. Actually, am I worried? Maybe I'm anxious. Maybe that's a more accurate description*

*to describe the emotions I'm currently feeling. Or perhaps I'm neither. Maybe I'm stressing about his future and the implications if he doesn't get his grades. Yep, that's it. I'm not worried, I'm not anxious. I'm stressed.'*

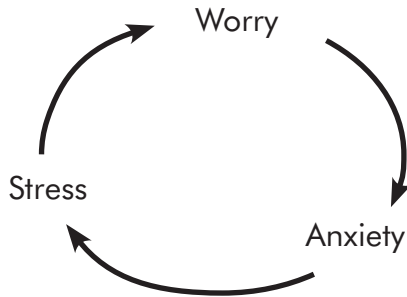
However, although people use the terms worry, anxiety and stress interchangeably, the following illustrations will clarify in your own mind the differences between them and how they relate to each other.

**Worry** is a form of thinking. Our mind becomes focused on a particular problem, concern or challenge. How we worry can either be constructive or destructive. There's '**worth it worry**', which hopefully leads to you taking some form of action to resolve an issue, or there's '**worthless worry**', which does nothing to actually deal with the concerns you have.

**Anxiety** is an uncomfortable feeling or emotion. It's that sense of apprehension and dread that something bad is going to happen or something is about to go wrong.

**Stress** is the body's physical response to a perceived threat. It's often an instantaneous unconscious reaction that is triggered in the primitive part of the brain. This part of the brain's primary goal is to keep you alive, hence the expression 'fight or flight response.' (We'll explore this in a lot more detail later.) Actually, there is a third survival response, which in this context rarely gets a mention, and that is to freeze. Sometimes our ability to keep still and motionless could help protect us from a predator. We share these survival responses with much of the animal kingdom. The primitive part of the brain is also often referred to as the reptilian part of the brain, which gives us a big clue about its evolutionary origins.

So our thinking (worry) leads us to feel (anxiety) which results in a physical response (stress).



However, the root of our problem doesn't always start with worry. It can begin at any part of the cycle.

For instance, my wife and I experienced a rare event in the north west of England one summer – we had over two hours of uninterrupted sunshine. Seizing the moment, we headed for some fields near where we lived in the hope of enjoying a stroll in the sunshine.

It was peaceful and idyllic.

At one stage we even contemplated holding hands.

We saw young children picking blackberries and the sound of an ice cream van announcing its presence in the distance.

Everything was calm and relaxed, and then suddenly, out of nowhere, our lives were in mortal danger.

On the other side of a hedge we were walking past was a huge vicious dog.

It had no lead.

No owner was in sight.

It had only one intention:

to kill my wife

and me.

An unannounced expletive escaped from my mouth.

My hair stood on end.

My heart seemed to awake from its leisurely afternoon.

I could literally feel its desperate attempt to pump blood through my veins, as if my very life depended on it.

My fight or flight response had definitely been activated.

In a nano second

I felt anxious.

I worried that any moment now the dog would attack us.

It didn't.

In fact we never saw it.

Not face to face anyway.

So what did really happen?

Well, most of the above did happen.

I perhaps exaggerated about contemplating holding hands.

But the rest is true.

Almost.

We were walking beside a hedge when we heard the barking of what sounded like a large, vicious and very aggressive dog. I couldn't actually see it as it was on the other side of a tall hedge but I was able to imagine it.

I pictured it without its owner.

Without a lead.

I even imagined what type of dog it was.

And I'm glad I imagined all of the above.

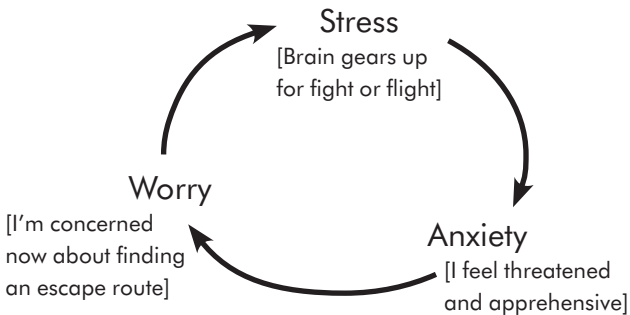
I'm glad my primitive brain was activated and that my body was instantaneously primed to deal with a potential physical attack.

Because if it was true I was in the most appropriate physical state to deal with the challenge.

This might seem strange in the light of some literature on the subject, but stress was my friend.

Feeling anxious felt entirely appropriate and worrying about our possible escape route and whether there was an opening in the hedge kept me focused and alert.

In this instance it was stress that triggered the cycle.



On other occasions we feel anxious for no apparent reason. We just sense intuitively that things are not right or something is wrong. We begin to worry as our mind wrestles with an unidentified problem.

This in turn triggers a stress response as our body experiences an increased heart rate, our pupils dilate and our chest tightens.

There are times when at a conscious level we're not sure why we're feeling the way we are and the term we use to describe how we're feeling may vary from person to person.

'I'm nervous.'

'I'm feeling really tense at the moment.'

'I'm stressed out.'

'I'm really anxious.'

'I'm worried about all sorts.'

Understandably in such a situation we don't take time to analyze our feelings and the accuracy of the terms used to describe them; we simply express them.

In this instance the cycle looks like this:



Sometimes there can be a clear reason for your anxiety. For example, imagine you're about to attend an important work meeting. You're feeling anxious because you know there will be a number of very senior people there. You're keen to impress. You're even keener not to make a mistake, say anything inappropriate or appear foolish in any way. But you begin to worry about the meeting. Questions buzz around you like an annoying wasp. 'What if I clam up? What if I'm asked a question and I don't know the answer? What if no one speaks to me?' As a result your anxiety increases. You sweat more, your mouth is dry, you feel awful.

So, given that people use different words to describe similar feelings or emotional states, for the purpose of this book I will refer to each term interchangeably. Ultimately the issue is not that we use the correct terminology, but more importantly that we understand the causes and the impact of worry, anxiety and stress, and why it's become such a big deal. Agree?

### *So what's the impact of worrying?*

When we worry it's like the engine of our mind is constantly being revved up. Worry and anxiety don't allow us time to switch off and rest. They don't allow us time to enjoy the journey.

Another analogy is that of an elastic band. It was designed to be stretched, but stretch it too far or for too long and it weakens. Likewise we can thrive on pressure. It's good for our own wellbeing if we're stretched at times. But stretch us too much for too long and healthy pressure can become unhealthy stress. We can weaken psychologically and emotionally. And if we're not careful, like that elastic band we can end up snapping.

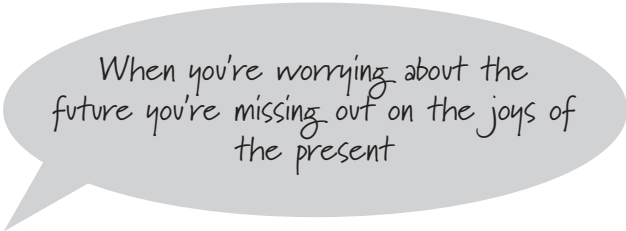
Worry can weaken us.

It can lead to a decrease in our sex drive.

Too much strain and stress weakens our immune system. We're more prone to sickness. We're using our thoughts and imagination about our future, not to inspire and motivate us, but to rob us of a sense of calm by focusing on potential problems, challenges and threats.

And we're using our thoughts and imagination about past events to do the same.

You could describe worry, anxiety and stress as an unholy trinity. They're not quite the axis of evil threatening world peace, but they can, when left unchecked, threaten and undermine our own sense of personal peace.



When you're worrying about the future you're missing out on the joys of the present

Worry drains us of energy. *Energy for life.*

Can you relate to mental as well as physical fatigue?

Yes?

Well, that's what worry can do to you.

It tires you out.

And when you're tired you're less likely to think straight.

And when you're not thinking straight it's easy to make stupid mistakes. To react to the world as you see it rather than respond to how it actually is.

The bottom line?

Stress makes you stupid.

And it can make you sick.

Stupid and sick. Some cocktail, eh?

Give me a piña colada any day.

But without realizing it we order up ourselves a large worry cocktail.

It's the costliest one on the menu

and we don't even know we're paying for it.

But we are.

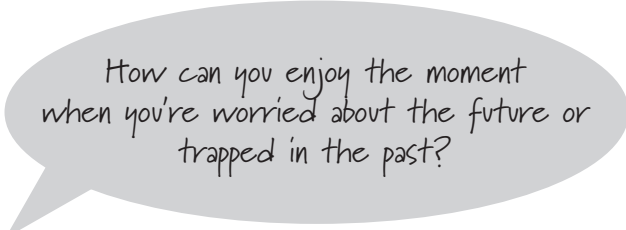
Big time.

We're paying for it with our sense of peace.

We're paying for it with the quality of our relationships.

We're paying for it with our health.

Worry robs us of the energy to focus on the 'today' in order to create a better 'tomorrow.'



How can you enjoy the moment  
when you're worried about the future or  
trapped in the past?

Given enough time worry becomes a habit. A label. If we're not careful worry can become our identity. We might as well introduce ourselves as 'Hello, I'm a worrier. Pleased to meet you.' Some people live life as if they've got a PhD in worrying. In fact they start becoming anxious and restless when they don't have anything to worry about. Like smoking, some people have become addicted to it. They need it. And despite the negative consequences they seem unable or perhaps unwilling to kick the worry habit. Something we'll explore in more detail later.

### *So does worry ever work?*

Absolutely. If a certain degree of worry motivates you to tackle problems in a productive manner then clearly it's been a positive catalyst towards change. When that's the case, great. It's what I referred to earlier as '**worth it worry**'. But the reality is that worry and anxiety are far more likely to disable you than enable you. Rather than help put you in a prime state to tackle your challenges, they instead unnerve and unbalance you.

That's the problem.

We've become used to a way of handling challenges that brings more harm than good.

But relax.

There is a way forward.

There is a way to use a certain degree of worry and anxiety to spur us on towards positive, constructive action. There is a way to tackle life's challenges in a calmer and more considered way. However, if you're looking for the recipe for a worry- and stress-free existence, you're reading the wrong book. If that's the

case I'd quit reading now if I were you. You'll be disappointed and disillusioned if that's what you're after. I'm in pursuit of a more practical approach.

We need challenge.

We need pressure.

We need to be stretched.

It's what makes us human. It's part of our evolutionary make up.

Remember that elastic band analogy? It was designed to be stretched. A limp elastic band is not much good to anyone. Right?

So the antidote to our anxieties is not a life of relaxation, reclining on a beach, sipping our favourite drink, listening to our favourite music whilst the waves of the sea lap up along the shore.

Honestly it isn't.

You may think it is.

And for some people that is their antidote.

For a while.

But trust me, that lifestyle can get monotonous.

Great for a few days.

Maybe even a couple of weeks.

But life often becomes boring when you've nothing to do. When you've nothing to focus your mind on. When there's no particular reason for getting out of bed in the morning.

You see we need a purpose if we're to function effectively as people.

It's not a blissful state of nirvana we're after. It's a sense of meaning.

A reason to be here.

On this planet.

Right now.

That's what we're really aiming for.

Not less pressure.

More purpose.

And with that purpose will come a need to deal with challenges, to seize opportunities, to take risks, to do things that at times make us feel uncomfortable.

That's what energizes our existence.

That's what we're really after.

Not stress free.

And along the way we'll need time out for rest and recovery. And we'll need to call upon all the resources imbued upon us from birth to fulfil our purpose in life.

And we'll also need to take care as well as take risks.

Because if we don't we'll find our biological make up that has evolved and developed over thousands of years to help equip us for survival can actually hinder our path to success.

How come? Well stay tuned because we're going to explore more about this a little later in the book.

The reality is the key to conquering our worries and to reducing our levels of stress and anxiety is not a strategy of elimination or avoidance.

It's about understanding.

It's about awareness.

It's about gaining an insight into how we function best as people. It's about acquiring the knowledge necessary to enable us to fulfil our potential as people. To enjoy, not simply endure the ride.

And when the game of life as we know it is over I want to share similar sentiments to the unknown author of this piece:

*‘Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in an attractive and well presented body; but rather to skid in sideways, chocolate in one hand, wine in the other, body thoroughly used up, totally worn out and screaming “Woo hoo, what a ride!”’*

I love that piece. I want to capture some of that spirit and essence in my life. It might not be wine and chocolate that floats your boat – but your goal is to find out what does.

We've all been given this amazing opportunity.

It's called life.

It comes with amazing possibilities.

It will inevitably include some heartache and setbacks along the way.

But it doesn't come with a clear set of instructions.

They're for us to discover.

And sadly the lessons we learn from others are not always helpful.

Sometimes we fail to learn from our own mistakes.

And what equipped us to deal with life just ten years ago may no longer be enough now.

The world is changing.

Rapidly.

Some of us are struggling to keep up.

Some of us are on the sidelines being held back from participating.

And what's holding us back?

Worry.

Anxiety.

Stress.

Do you know what the big deal is?

The big deal about worry is that it robs us of living a meaningful and worthwhile life.

It robs us of enjoyment.

It robs us of a sense of peace and wellbeing.

That's a big deal in my book.

And so that's why we're going to spend time understanding the reasons behind our worries, and learn techniques and ideas on how to deal with it effectively.

Life can be a bit of a rollercoaster at times.

Are you ready to engage in and enjoy the ride?

Great. Then let's begin with understanding the reasons why worry, anxiety and stress can put the brakes on our momentum and ultimately derail us.