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introduction: a letter to the reader

Welcome to *The Worry Workbook for Teens: Effective CBT Strategies to Break the Cycle of Chronic Worry and Anxiety!* Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a hands-on program that helps people to develop the skills they need to cope with anxiety and change their behavior to reduce the intensity and frequency of their worries. This workbook presents CBT strategies intended to break down the cycle of thoughts, emotions, physical feelings, and behaviors that worried teens tend to experience.

Although you can dive into the workbook activities in whatever order you choose, you'll find that the workbook is organized by type of activity. The first section helps you understand the difference between typical "everyday" types of worry and chronic, difficult-to-control worry that gets in the way of living your life. The second section goes further into the types of unhelpful thoughts that increase your anxiety—I call these "junk mail thinking." The third section helps you develop skills for dealing with your junk mail thoughts.

The fourth section of the workbook focuses on changes you can make in your behavior that will further challenge your anxious thoughts. It provides step-by-step instructions for getting rid of behaviors that take time away from activities you'd rather be doing. This section also offers strategies to address common sources of worry, including the excessive use of social media.

In the fifth section, you'll learn mind-body techniques—such as how to relax your body—that make you less vulnerable to the stress that fuels worry and anxiety. The workbook concludes with how to maintain the improvements you've made by practicing the CBT strategies presented here.

As a bonus to this workbook, you can access additional

activities and exercises online. In these activities, you'll learn to identify exactly what you're worried about and to challenge the common belief that worry is protective. You'll also learn about managing your schedule and reducing anxiety about taking tests. The online exercises will deepen the skills that you build in this workbook. Please visit <http://www.newharbinger.com/35845> to download these bonus activities and exercises.

Many teens will find it sufficient to work through the exercises independently or with the support of their parents. However, others will benefit from using the strategies offered here in their work with a qualified mental health professional such as

- a therapist who specializes in CBT for youth with anxiety disorders—this may be a licensed clinical or counseling psychologist (PhD or PsyD), social worker (LCSW), psychiatrist (MD), or licensed mental health counselor (LMHC);
- a medical doctor (psychiatrist or primary care doctor), who can determine if medication would further help you manage your anxiety; or
- a guidance counselor or school psychologist, who can help you apply these strategies to situations that come up at school or with peers.

If you think you might need additional help or support from one or more of these professionals, talk with your parents, school counselor, or primary care doctor (or pediatrician)—they can make a plan to ensure you're getting the help you need.

Congratulations as you get started with this workbook. You're taking the first steps toward breaking your own personal worry cycle!

SECTION ONE

UNDERSTANDING WORRY

what is worry, and when is it a problem?

for you to know

Everybody worries sometimes. *Worry* is a thought process that focuses on what will happen in the future; it often involves thinking of all the ways a situation could turn out (especially the ways it could turn out badly). To some extent, worry helps us prepare and come up with solutions for all the problems that could arise. As such, people tend to worry when there's good reason to do so. For example, if you've been getting low grades on many of your recent math tests, you might worry about an exam you have tomorrow; if your grandfather is in the hospital, you might worry about his future health.

On the other hand, some people worry *excessively*—they worry frequently about many different aspects of their life, above and beyond what would be considered typical or helpful. Oftentimes, these worries are about situations that are unlikely to happen or about situations the person has no control over. On other occasions, worriers may think in excruciating detail about events in the far future that may be controllable, but there's little use in thinking about them now. These worries tend to take up a lot of time and energy.

Consider Amanda, a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore. She earns good grades in honors classes, plays on the varsity soccer team, and has several close friends. She gets along well with her parents and her younger sister. However, Amanda spends many hours a day worrying about how she might mess up and lose everything she has worked hard for. She worries about getting poor grades, letting down her soccer team and losing her

varsity position, and upsetting or offending her friends. As a result, she spends more time studying than she needs to, constantly checks in with her soccer coach to make sure he thinks she's doing what she's supposed to, and often asks her friends if they're mad at her. Amanda complains of feeling "so tired" most of the time, and she has stomachaches that affect her appetite.

Like Amanda, some people with intense, frequent worry that interferes with their lives meet criteria for *generalized anxiety disorder* (GAD). GAD in teenagers is characterized by (1) frequent (that is, more days than not), excessive, and difficult-to-control worry about two or more areas of life (for example, school, friendships, health, safety); (2) one or more physical or cognitive symptoms, such as restlessness, headaches, difficulty sleeping, grouchiness, and poor concentration; and (3) a duration of at least six months (American Psychiatric Association 2013). The worries and physical/cognitive symptoms also get in the way of life somehow—for example, difficulty going to school or completing schoolwork, or not having enough time to spend with friends because the worries are so time consuming.

About 3 percent of American teenagers (ages thirteen to eighteen) have GAD, though many more teens have unhelpful worry that falls short of meeting criteria for GAD (Burstein et al. 2014)—for example, those who are prone to worry or stress, but the worries do not yet interfere with school performance or social relationships. This workbook is intended for teenagers who are bothered by worries and want to learn helpful anxiety management strategies, whether or not they have a diagnosis of GAD.

for you to do

Are worries a problem for you? After reading each statement below, circle whether you agree or disagree that the statement describes you:

--	--	--

I worry about a lot of different things in my life.	Agree	Disagree
People tell me I worry more than I need to.	Agree	Disagree
I'm worried about something most days.	Agree	Disagree
It's hard for me to stop my worries.	Agree	Disagree
I've been a worrier for at least six months.	Agree	Disagree
My worries take up an hour or more of my day.	Agree	Disagree
My worries make me do things I don't really need to do, like ask for reassurance from my family and friends, study more than I need to, look up information about my worries online, and so on.	Agree	Disagree
When I'm worried, I feel physically uncomfortable (that is, I get stomachaches or headaches, have trouble sleeping or low energy, or have trouble concentrating).	Agree	Disagree

Count the number of times you circled "Agree."

If zero, then worry is unlikely to be a significant problem for you.

If one to four, worry may be causing you problems that can be worked on using strategies from this book.

If five or more, your worry is likely problematic. This workbook will help you develop strategies to manage your worry, but you may benefit from additional help from a school counselor, therapist, or psychiatrist.

more to do

Consider how worry interferes in your life. The checklist below will help you figure out the extent to which worry takes up your time and energy or gets in your way.

Worry causes me to...

procrastinate or have trouble getting my schoolwork done on time.

spend more time than I need to on my schoolwork.

avoid certain situations at school (for example, giving class presentations, going to the cafeteria, or asking for help).

avoid going to school altogether.

ask my teachers a lot of questions or for more help than I really need.

frequently visit the nurse or school counselor.

feel panicky or “blank out” when I’m taking a test or quiz.

avoid trying out for sports, theater, music, or other activities.

overprepare or overpractice for my extracurricular activities.

do more than I really need to make sure people like me or don’t get mad at me.

ask my friends a lot if everything is okay or if they’re mad at me.

check over my text messages for signs that my friends are upset with me.

avoid social situations (for example, parties, hanging out with friends, or going to the mall).

check my appearance a lot or spend more time than most teens getting ready in the morning.

frequently check the Internet for information on things I’m worried about.

have difficulty making decisions.

ask my parents or other family members for a lot of reassurance or to look for evidence they think that I’m doing

things the “right” way.

ask my family members to solve my problems for me.

snap at my family members because I’m feeling so irritable.

have frequent trouble falling or staying sleeping.

(other)

(other)

(other)

Keep in mind the areas of interference you’ve checked off above—this will help you focus your efforts as you work through the strategies presented in this workbook. These strategies will certainly take hard work and consistent practice, but you can do it! With persistence, your worries will become less intense, more manageable, and much less of an obstacle to doing what’s important to you in life.

the worry cycle

for you to know

Has anyone ever said to you, “Don’t worry” or “Just calm down”? If only it were that simple! It takes time and practice to learn strategies that will reduce your worry, but the first step is straightforward: break down your worry into more manageable parts. Different aspects of worry play off of one another to make you feel more and more anxious, a process called the “worry cycle.” Components of the worry cycle include these:

- **Trigger:** This starts the worry cycle. It’s often a particular event or situation (for example, an argument with your parents, a big test at school, a friend who isn’t returning your message, and so on), but sometimes a thought or a feeling triggers the worry cycle, even if nothing stressful is happening.
- **Emotions:** Often you notice emotions first: you might feel anxious, frustrated, scared, angry, disappointed, or other emotions.
- **Physical feelings:** If you pay close attention, your body may signal to you that it’s stressed: your neck and shoulder muscles tighten, your heart beats faster, you can’t catch your breath, or your head aches. Some teens report having panic attacks, when four or more intense physical symptoms happen at once (for example, heart racing, light-headedness, shortness of breath, tingling in hands and feet, sudden hot or cold feelings). A panic attack isn’t dangerous and usually passes within a few minutes, if you just let it run its course.