

It hasn't happened yet

A short book about worry, and why it isn't the same as
getting ready

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book. You can read it in two or three evenings.

It's about one habit. Something might go wrong next week or next year, and you go over it in your head, days or months ahead, many times. Most of the time the thing never arrives. When it does arrive, it's rarely in the form you rehearsed. And all the way through, the going over has felt like the responsible thing to do, as if it were a kind of preparation.

I'm not going to tell you to stop worrying. You've been told that before, and if it worked you wouldn't be reading this. I'm also not going to tell you to think positive, or that everything will be fine. Some things won't be fine. In the best study I could find, about one worry in eleven did come true, and chapter 12 is about those.

What I'll argue is narrower. Worrying and getting ready are two different activities that feel alike from the inside. Getting ready is worth your time. Worrying mostly isn't. You can learn to tell them apart, and then to do more of the first and less of the second.

Two cautions before we start.

This book is about things that haven't happened. If something is happening now, the answer is action and other people's help, and a book about habits of thought is the wrong tool. A lump you've found needs a doctor. Letters about a debt need a debt adviser. A partner who frightens you is a reason to ring a domestic abuse helpline. None of those is a worry in the sense I mean. They're problems, and problems are dealt with differently.

The second caution is about how much you worry. Everybody does it to some degree. But suppose you've worried on most days for months, about many different things, and you find it hard to control. Suppose it comes with poor sleep, tense muscles, tiredness, or trouble concentrating. Then it may be what doctors call generalised anxiety disorder. It's common and it's treatable, and a GP is the place to start. You can read this book as well, but don't read it instead. Chapter 13 says more. If you take medication for anxiety or low mood, nothing here is a reason to stop it or change the dose.

The middle chapters each take one belief that makes worrying seem sensible. "I'm just being prepared." "It didn't happen because I worried." "At least I won't be caught off guard." "It shows I care." Each one is partly true, and I'll try to give it its due before I argue with it.

Some of the arguments rest on research. The notes at the back say which studies, and how far I think they can be trusted. The rest is my own reasoning, and I'll say so where it matters.

The chat on Thursday

Here's an example. On Friday afternoon your manager stops at your desk and says, "Can we have a quick chat on Thursday? Nothing urgent." Then she goes to a meeting and you go home for the weekend.

By Sunday evening you've had the chat about thirty times. In most versions it's about the report that went out late in March. In some it's redundancy, because there was that email about costs. You've worked out what you'd say, and what she'd say back, and how your voice would sound. You've got as far as telling your partner you've lost your job, and working out how long the savings would last. You were at your nephew's birthday on Saturday, and you couldn't now say what was in the sandwiches.

On Thursday she asks whether you'd mind covering for someone in the Leeds office for two days in June.

If that's familiar, you'll also know what came next. There was a wave of relief, and you felt a bit foolish for an hour. Then, by Thursday evening, something else had moved into the space. It might have been the noise the boiler has started making, or your daughter driving back on the motorway late on Sunday. The worry about the chat had gone, and the worrying carried on with a new subject.

That last detail is the one I'd like you to keep hold of. If worrying were caused by the things you worry about, it would stop when they were settled. It doesn't. It moves on to something else. That's

the first sign that we're dealing with a habit and not with a series of unrelated emergencies.

So I want to split two things that usually travel under one name.

The first is the concern. Your manager might be unhappy with you, the boiler might be on its way out, and motorways at night do carry some risk. Concerns like these are often quite reasonable, and a person with none would be careless. This book has no quarrel with your concerns.

The second is the worrying, which is what you do with a concern once you've got it. You run the scene, then run it again with a small change, then follow it three steps further into a future that depends on three things all going wrong. It's done mostly in words, as a conversation with yourself, and it usually opens with "what if". It doesn't reach an end, only a pause when something interrupts it.

A concern is a fact about your situation, whereas worrying is an activity that takes time and attention, like any other. It can be done for five minutes or for five days over exactly the same concern. How much of it you do has very little to do with how serious the concern is, and I'd guess you've noticed that yourself. You've probably lost a weekend to something trivial, and you've probably been oddly calm about something serious.

From here on I'll call one spell of this, from the first "what if" to the point where something breaks it off, a round. The Sunday evening in the example was one long round, made up of many shorter ones.

I should say what I'm not claiming. I don't think you're weak or irrational. Worrying is an ordinary human activity, and the people who do a lot of it are often the conscientious ones who get things done. I'm also not saying the future is safe, because it isn't, and some of what you fear will happen to you, as it does to everyone. My claim is only about the rounds. I think they give you much less than they seem to, that they cost more than you've counted, and that the useful part of them can be had in a few minutes with a pen.

Before the next chapter, do one small thing. Write down three things you're worried about at the moment. Write each as a prediction that could turn out true or false, with a date. "My manager will criticise my work on Thursday" is a prediction. "What if work goes badly" isn't, because nothing could ever prove it wrong. Put the piece of paper somewhere you'll find it again. We'll come back to it.

What worrying buys you

People don't keep up a habit for years unless it pays them something. So before I count what worrying costs, I'll set out what I think it gives you.

The first payment is the sense of doing something. A threat has appeared and you can't act on it yet, because Thursday is four days off. Waiting with nothing to do is one of the more unpleasant states a person can be in. Worrying fills that gap with what feels like work. There's effort involved and it tires you out, so at the end of an evening of it you feel as though a shift has been put in. When researchers asked worriers why they worry, the most common answers were that it motivates them, that it prepares them for the worst, and that it helps them avoid or prevent bad outcomes. All three describe worrying as a job that needs doing.

The second payment is a feeling of being responsible. Somebody ought to be thinking about the boiler and the motorway and the mortgage rate, and you're the one doing it. Against that, relaxing looks like negligence. Many worriers half believe that the moment they stop keeping watch is the moment it'll happen.

The third payment is harder to see, and I find it the most interesting. Worrying is mostly made of words. Researchers who interrupted people during rounds of worry and asked what was in their minds found that they mostly reported thoughts and not pictures. That may matter, because a picture of your daughter's car on the hard shoulder goes straight to your stomach, while a sentence about it is duller. One theory holds that talking to

yourself about a fear is a way of not quite feeling it. You stay busy with the commentary and avoid the jolt. The researcher who proposed this, Thomas Borkovec, called it a speculation, and I'd treat it as one. But it matches something people often say, which is that worrying is unpleasant and yet somehow preferable to sitting still with the fear itself.

The fourth payment comes at the end. Thursday arrives, the chat turns out to be about Leeds, and relief floods in. That relief is a real pleasure, and some of the credit for it goes, without your noticing, to the worrying that came before. Chapter 5 is about this.

The fifth is protection against shock. If you've already lived through the worst in your head, nobody can spring it on you. Chapter 6 is about that one.

I don't think any of these payments is imaginary. The question I'd ask is what they're made of. Every one of them is a feeling. There's the feeling of doing something, the feeling of being responsible, a sharp fear made duller, relief when it's over, and the sense of being braced. Not one of them changes what happens on Thursday. The chat will be whatever it was always going to be.

Now for the costs, most of which you know better than I do.

The most obvious is time. An hour of worrying is an hour of your life, spent in a future that mostly won't occur. It adds up to days in a month.

Less obvious is what happens to the present. You were at the birthday party and you weren't. People who live with worriers often say this before the worrier does. The children notice that

you're looking through them, and a good weekend that would have been yours goes by with you elsewhere.

Sleep suffers too. Rounds start easily in bed, because there's nothing to interrupt them, and a tired mind is worse at stopping them the next day.

Your body pays a share of the bill. The shoulders and jaw stay tight, the stomach churns, and headaches come more often. Your body can't tell a rehearsed disaster from a real one, so it gets ready each time.

Decisions get put off. It seems odd that someone who thinks about a problem all day should fail to act on it, but it's common. The worrying takes the place of the phone call. You can worry about the noise from the boiler for a month without ringing the engineer, because ringing might bring bad news and worrying lets you stay busy with the problem without risking that.

And the habit spreads. Each round you complete makes the next one easier to start. New subjects get recruited. People who've worried for years often say there's always something, and that's what you'd expect if the rounds came first and the subjects were found to fit them.

At any point in a round, you can ask yourself one test question, which is whether the last ten minutes have produced anything you can do or decide. If they have, fine, that was thinking. If they haven't, you've been paid in feelings, and the price was ten minutes of your evening.

"I'm just being prepared"

This is the belief that holds the whole habit up, so it deserves a careful answer. It goes something like this. "The world is uncertain. Sensible people think ahead. When I go over what might go wrong, I'm getting ready for it. People who don't do this are the ones who get caught out."

Most of that is true. Thinking ahead is one of the best things a human mind can do. People who check the tyres before a long drive, keep some money aside, and read the contract before signing do have fewer disasters than people who don't. If worrying were the same as that, I'd have no book to write.

So look closely at what preparation is like when you see someone do it. Take a person getting ready for a job interview. They read about the company. They write down five questions they might be asked and sketch an answer to each. They check the train times and pick an earlier train in case of delays. They iron a shirt. That's an evening's work at most, and at the end of it they're finished, in the plain sense that there's nothing left on the list.

Now take the same person worrying about the same interview. "What if I go blank? What if they ask about the gap in my CV? What if the train's late? What if I don't get it, and I'm stuck in this job another year? What if I'm just not good enough for this kind of role?" That can go on for a fortnight, and at the end of it no shirt has been ironed.

I'd point to three differences. Preparation is concrete. It deals in train times and shirts, and it asks "how" and "what". Worrying is abstract. It asks "what if" and "why me", and it drifts upwards from this interview to your whole career to what kind of person you are. Preparation also comes to an end, because each item gets done or dropped and the list runs out. Worrying doesn't, because every answer raises another "what if". And preparation leaves something behind that you can point to afterwards, such as a list or a booking or a packed bag, while worrying leaves you tired and no further on.

A psychologist called Edward Watkins reviewed a large body of research on repetitive thinking and found it could be either helpful or harmful. One of the things that made the difference was the level of the thinking. Concrete, specific thinking about a difficulty tended to go with planning and recovery, and abstract, general thinking about the same difficulty tended to go with anxiety and low mood. That fits what you see if you compare the two lists above.

There's more direct evidence too. In 2020 two researchers, Sandra Llera and Michelle Newman, ran an experiment on exactly this belief. They asked 185 people to describe a real problem in their lives. They then asked some of them to think about the problem in a worrying way, some to think about it objectively, and some to do a breathing exercise. After that, everyone came up with solutions and picked their best one. Judges who didn't know which group anyone was in rated the solutions from the worry group as less effective than those from the objective group. The people who

worried more also said they were less likely to carry their solution out. And they finished more anxious than the others. This held for people who worried a lot in daily life and for people who didn't.

An older finding sits alongside it. Graham Davey tested whether people who worry a great deal are worse at solving problems, and found they weren't. What they lacked was confidence in their solutions. This rings true to me. A worrier often has the answer by minute three, doesn't trust it, and spends the next two hours checking it against imagined cases.

Here's the honest objection. Sometimes a round of worry does lead to a useful thought. You're lying there fretting about the holiday and you suddenly remember the passport expires in May. That happens, and I wouldn't deny it. But notice how it happened. The useful thought arrived early and took a few seconds. It was concrete. It would have arrived in any sort of thinking about the holiday, including a calm five minutes with a checklist. What I'd question is the hour of worrying that went on after it.

I think of the first flicker of worry as an alarm, and a good one. It tells you that something needs attention. The mistake is to keep the alarm ringing in the belief that the ringing is the work. When the first "what if" arrives, you can ask what you'd do about it with a pen in your hand. If something goes down on paper, such as a call to make, a thing to check or a date to look up, you're preparing. If nothing can go on the paper, there's nothing to prepare, and what follows will be a round.

For this week, I'd suggest you only watch. Catch yourself in a round once or twice and look at the questions you're asking. Count how many begin with "what if", and how many with "how" or "when". You don't have to change anything yet.

"But it might happen"

Every worry carries a small, fair point inside it. It might happen. Managers do deliver bad news, and so do boilers and scans. Nobody can promise you otherwise, and I won't try.

The useful question is how often. Worrying rarely asks that, because it deals in "could" and leaves "how likely" alone. While you're in a round, a one in a hundred chance and a one in two chance feel about the same.

In 2020 Lucas LaFreniere and Michelle Newman published a study that did the counting. They took 29 university students whose worrying was severe enough to meet the criteria for generalised anxiety disorder. For ten days the students wrote down their worries whenever a phone prompt asked them to. They were told to record only specific worries that could be tested, the kind that would clearly either come true or not within a month. Then for thirty days they tracked what happened.

About 91 per cent of the worries didn't come true. Each student had recorded 34 separate worries on average, so there were plenty of them. The most common score for one person was 100 per cent, which means that for seven of the 29, not a single thing they'd worried about happened. The worst score anyone got was 53 per cent untrue. So even the unluckiest person in the study was wrong more often than right.

The study also looked at the worries that did come true. The students rated about 30 per cent of those as turning out better than they'd expected, about 44 per cent as bad as expected, and about 26 per cent as worse.

I'd be misleading you if I made this sound bigger than it is. It's a small study of 29 people, nearly all of them young women at one American university. The students judged their own outcomes. Only worries that could be settled within a month were counted, which leaves out the slow ones, such as "what if I never meet anyone" or "what if my pension isn't enough". I don't know of a larger study that has repeated it with other kinds of people. But it's the only careful count of this sort I could find, and I think it agrees with what most people find when they check their own record.

And people almost never check it. When a worry doesn't come true, nothing happens to mark it. The chat on Thursday turns out to be about Leeds, and within an hour you've forgotten you were ever frightened. Nobody adds it to a tally. The one time in ten that the fear was right is a different matter, because it was painful and you remember it vividly for years afterwards. "I knew it. I had a feeling about that." So your memory holds a short list of hits and no list at all of misses, and from that record worrying looks like a reliable guide.

Suppose a racing tipster were wrong nine times in ten. You'd stop buying his tips within a month, provided you could see his record. Your worrying has never had to publish one.

You might fairly say that one in ten isn't nothing, and that some of those could be serious. I agree. If a boiler engineer told you there was a one in ten chance of a gas leak, you wouldn't shrug. But look at what you'd do. You'd have it fixed, that afternoon. A real risk of one in ten calls for a piece of preparation, which is a job with an end. It doesn't call for forty rounds of thinking about it. The likelihood tells you whether a concern deserves some action. Nothing about it tells you to rehearse.

There was one more finding in that study. The students who saw the highest share of their worries fail to come true improved the most over the course of it. The authors take that to mean that watching your own predictions fail, in writing, is part of what helps. I can't promise you the same effect, but it costs almost nothing to try.

So turn the three predictions from chapter 1 into a running log. It can be a page in a notebook or a note on your phone. When you catch a worry, write it as a prediction with a date, in one line. Once a week, go back and mark each one that has come due. Put a tick if it happened and a cross if it didn't, and add a word on whether it was as bad as you'd thought. Don't try to argue yourself out of anything. For now you're only keeping score, which is more than your worrying has ever done.

"It didn't happen because I worried"

Hardly anyone says this one out loud, because said out loud it sounds like magic. But a lot of people hold it somewhere below the level of speech. You can tell by what happens when they try to stop. If you imagine deciding, today, not to worry about your daughter's drive home, you may feel a faint dread along with the thought, as though by relaxing you'd be tempting fate.

The belief comes in two versions. In the sensible version, worrying makes me take precautions, and the precautions prevent the bad thing. In the superstitious version, the worrying itself somehow keeps the bad thing away. Researchers who study worry have found both. A Canadian group led by Mark Freeston built a questionnaire called "Why Worry?" and found that people's reasons fell into two groups. One was that worrying helps you find solutions. The other was that worrying stops bad things from happening.

I dealt with the sensible version in chapter 3. Precautions do prevent things, but it's the precautions that do the preventing, and worrying is a slow and unreliable way to arrive at them. The superstitious version needs its own chapter, because it isn't really a belief you hold so much as something you've been trained into.

The training goes like this. You worry about something for a week, and then it doesn't happen, because most things don't. You feel a rush of relief. Relief is one of the strongest rewards there is, and it lands straight after a long spell of worrying. Anything that's followed by a reward tends to get repeated. The mind doesn't stop

to ask whether the worrying caused the good outcome. It only registers that worrying came first and relief came after. Since nine worries in ten end this way, you get the reward nine times in ten. It would be hard to design a better schedule for building a habit.

Borkovec and others who study worry have described this pattern, and they used the word superstitious for it. I think it's a fair word. A football fan wears the same socks to every home game because his team won the first time he wore them. They win about half the time, which is plenty to keep the socks in use. He doesn't really believe in the socks. He just feels uneasy at the thought of leaving them in the drawer.

Your unease at the thought of not worrying is of the same kind. It's what a long-rewarded habit feels like when you think about breaking it, and it tells you nothing about whether worrying works.

You can't rerun your life without the worrying to see what would have happened. But you can do something nearly as good, which is to look at the things you forgot to worry about. There are thousands of them. You didn't worry about last Tuesday's drive to work, or the meeting the week before the one you dreaded, or your son's school trip in the spring when you were distracted by moving house. Those went fine as well, and they went fine at about the same rate as the things you did worry about. If worry protected anything, the unworried parts of your life ought to be where the disasters cluster, and they aren't.

It works the other way round too. Think of the worst things that have happened to you, the three or four real blows. I'd guess that most of them weren't on your list beforehand. People very often say that the thing that actually hit them came on an ordinary Tuesday, from a direction they hadn't been watching. All that lookout duty was posted on the wrong wall.

Here's a small experiment, and I'd keep it small. Pick one minor thing this week that you'd normally worry about. It might be whether a parcel will turn up, or whether a friend liked the present. Decide in advance not to give it any rounds. When it comes to mind, note it and move on to something else, without arguing. Then see how it turns out. One trial proves nothing, and I wouldn't claim it did. But you may notice the faint feeling of tempting fate as you do it. If you do, you'll know the belief in this chapter is one of yours, and you'll have seen it fail once.

"At least I won't be caught off guard"

Some people worry mainly as a guard against shock. They reason that if they expect the worst all the time, the worst can't ambush them. They've seen what it's like to be happy and hopeful and then be knocked flat by a phone call, and they've decided, not always consciously, never to be in that position again. For them it seems better to stay low than to be dropped from a height.

Michelle Newman and Sandra Llera have built a theory of chronic worry on this idea. They propose that some people are especially sensitive to sudden shifts from feeling fine to feeling dreadful, and that they use worry to keep themselves in a mildly bad state so that no shift can be that sharp. On their account the worry isn't a failed attempt to feel better. It's working as intended, because it keeps the person braced.

I find this the most sympathetic of all the reasons for worrying. It usually has a history. Somewhere back there is a phone call, a diagnosis, or a parent's mood that changed without warning. Bracing was a reasonable response to it.

But consider how the trade works. You pay with certainty, a bit each day, in low mood and tension and spoiled weekends. What you get for it is a softer landing on an event that, going by chapter 4, will mostly not occur. It's like an insurance policy that collects the premium every day, and when the claim finally comes in, pays nothing out. The premium was the only thing that was ever

certain. If the event does come, you've suffered in advance and you'll suffer again, since bracing takes off less of the blow than you'd hope.

There's honest evidence on the other side, and I want you to have it. Kate Sweeny and her colleagues followed 230 law graduates through the four months of waiting for their results in the California bar exam. The ones who spent the wait anxious and pessimistic, going over and over it, did respond better when the news came. If they'd failed, they handled it more productively. If they'd passed, they were more delighted. So bracing isn't nonsense, and there was a measurable payoff at the end.

The same study found something else, though. Nothing the graduates tried made the waiting itself any easier, and some of their efforts seemed to backfire. They bought the payoff with four months of misery. A separate review by Sweeny and Zlatan Krizan looked at when people naturally lower their expectations, and found that they tend to do it as the moment of truth gets close. The authors think that late turn towards pessimism serves a purpose.

I draw a practical conclusion from these two pieces of work, and it's my own reading and not theirs. If bracing helps, it helps at the end. Whatever softening it gives you can be had by lowering your expectations on results day, or the evening before. Being braced since February adds nothing to it. If you like to walk into the room expecting the worst, walk into the room that way. You don't have to live that way for the four months before.

There's also a well-known strategy called defensive pessimism, studied by Julie Norem and Nancy Cantor in the 1980s. Some people set their expectations low before a test or a performance and then do perfectly well, and when experimenters interfered with the strategy, those people did worse. If that's you, and you have a pessimistic routine before big events that ends in good work, I wouldn't take it away from you. What matters is whether the pessimism is tied to an event, lasts a limited time, and ends in effort. The thing this book is about has none of those features.

So I'm not asking you to become an optimist. I'm asking you to notice when the bracing starts. If the event is on Thursday and the bracing began the Friday before, you might ask what the first five days of it bought you.

"I couldn't cope if it did"

If you look inside almost any worry, you'll find two predictions and not one. The first is that the bad thing will happen. The second is that when it does, you won't be able to bear it. Chapter 4 dealt with the first. The second gets less attention and I suspect it does more damage.

You can see it in how a round of worry ends, or fails to. Worry runs the film up to the worst moment and stops it there. The manager says "we're letting you go", and the film freezes on your face. Then it rewinds and plays again. It never shows the next morning, or the week after, when you've rung two people you used to work with and rewritten your CV. It never shows month four, in the new job, which may be better or worse than the old one but which you're getting on with. If all you ever see is that frozen frame, it's not surprising you conclude you couldn't cope, because in that one frame nobody is coping yet.

There's good evidence that people get this prediction wrong in a consistent direction. Daniel Gilbert and his colleagues ran six studies in which people forecast how they'd feel after a bad event, and then the researchers looked at how people who'd really been through it felt. The events included the end of a relationship, being turned down for a job, and failing to get tenure at a university. In every case people expected to feel bad for longer than people actually did. Gilbert's explanation is that we have a set of mental processes that go to work after a blow. We find reasons and new

plans, and we find what else there is in life. These processes work quietly. Since we don't notice them working, we leave them out when we predict how we'll feel.

I need to be careful here. None of this means bad events don't hurt, or that you'd be fine within a week. Some losses are terrible and stay with people for years. My claim is that your forecast of your own collapse is unreliable, and it errs on the side of pessimism.

You have evidence of your own on this. Think back to the hard things that have already happened to you, the ones you'd have said in advance you couldn't get through. You had no rehearsal for most of them. You got the news, and then you did the next thing, and the thing after that, often rather capably, and people may have said they didn't know how you managed. You managed because a real problem, unlike a what-if, gives you things to do.

That points to a practical difference, and I think it's the most useful thing in this chapter. A what-if can't be coped with, because nothing in it is fixed. You can't phone anyone about a redundancy that hasn't been announced. A real event, however bad, comes with particulars, such as a date and a sum of money and a name to ring. People are much better at coping with particulars than at coping with fog. So the sense that you couldn't cope comes partly from trying to cope in advance, with nothing to get hold of.

When you catch the frozen frame, try running the film on. Ask what you'd do the next morning, and then what you'd do that week. Ask who you'd ring, and what you'd say to a friend in the same position. Write three lines. You'll usually find that you have a rough

plan, that it took four minutes, and that the scene loses some of its grip once it has a next morning. Then stop. Do this once for each fear, because if you repeat it nightly it has turned into a round.

"I just need to know"

It's ten at night and your daughter said she'd text when she got in. She hasn't. You check the phone. You check the traffic news for the M6. You check the phone again, then look at when she was last online. Your partner says she's probably just gone straight to bed, and that helps for about four minutes. Then you ask him again, in different words.

This kind of worry is a hunt for certainty. You know an accident is unlikely. What you can't stand is the not knowing. If someone could tell you for sure, even if the news were middling, you feel you could settle.

A group of researchers in Quebec, among them Michel Dugas and Robert Ladouceur, have spent years on this. They call it intolerance of uncertainty, and in their studies it separated people with severe chronic worry from other people better than anything else they measured. In one experiment with 42 volunteers, they used a gambling task to push people's tolerance for uncertainty up or down, and the group that had been made less tolerant went on to worry more. It was a small study, but it suggests the intolerance comes first and the worry follows from it.

Seen this way, a round of worry is an attempt to reach certainty by thinking. You run every possible version of events in the hope of arriving at the one that lets you say "right, it'll be fine". It can't succeed, because the future isn't available for inspection and no amount of thinking makes it so. That's why rounds don't end. The certainty they're looking for doesn't exist yet.

The same hunt drives the behaviours that go with worry. You check the phone, read about symptoms online at midnight, and refresh the parcel tracking. You ask someone "do you think it'll be all right?", though they can't know either. Each of these brings a drop of relief, and that's the trouble with them. The relief lasts minutes and teaches you to check again. Reading about symptoms is the worst of them, because every search turns up one frightening possibility you hadn't thought of. You close the laptop less certain than when you opened it.

Here's something you may have missed about yourself. You tolerate uncertainty very well in most of your life. You eat in restaurants without inspecting the kitchen, and you drive through green lights on the assumption that the other road is on red. You let a surgeon you met once put you to sleep. You have no certainty in any of these cases and you don't ask for it. So the intolerance isn't a feature of your character. It applies to a few particular subjects, usually the ones that matter most to you, where you've got into the habit of demanding a guarantee that you'd never expect anywhere else.

One objection is that wanting to know is only sensible, and that surely information is a good thing. It is, when it's available and when it would change what you do. If the scan result is ready, ring and get it. If the route has a closure, find another. But you know the difference between looking something up once and the fifth check of the phone in ten minutes. The fifth check isn't for information. There was no new information at the fourth.

I should add a caution. If checking has become a large part of your day, with long routines that you feel compelled to complete, or if fears about your health take up hours and visits to the doctor don't settle them, that goes beyond the everyday habit this book is about. It's worth telling a GP about, because there are specific treatments.

For the everyday version, the treatment that Dugas and Ladouceur's group developed includes practice at leaving small things uncertain on purpose. In a small trial of 26 patients, most of them no longer met the criteria for generalised anxiety disorder afterwards, and their tolerance for uncertainty had gone up. The treatment had several parts, so I can't tell you how much the practice alone contributed. But it's cheap to try.

Start with things that barely matter. Send an ordinary email without rereading it a third time. Order something and don't look at the tracking. Go to a restaurant you haven't looked up. Let a friend choose the film. When you want reassurance from someone, ask once, take the answer, and don't ask again that day. In each case you'll feel a small itch of not knowing, and the practice is to leave it alone and see what happens to it. It fades, generally within minutes. You're teaching yourself, on cheap material, that the itch can be left alone and nothing follows.

"It shows I care"

In a good many families, worry is how love gets said. "Text me when you get there." "I couldn't sleep until I heard the door." "I've been worried sick about you." If you grew up with that, you learned two things together. One was that people who love you worry about you. The other was that if you don't worry about someone, perhaps you don't love them enough.

So the idea of worrying less about your children, or your parents, or your partner's health, can feel like a plan to care less. There's a touch of the last chapter's superstition in it too, a feeling that a good mother stays on watch, and that the one night she doesn't will be the night something happens.

I want to separate caring from worrying, because I think they've been welded together by habit and they come apart quite cleanly.

Caring shows up in what you do for the other person. It might mean ringing your father on Sundays, going with him to the hospital appointment and writing down what the consultant says. It might mean teaching your daughter to check her tyres and paying for breakdown cover. When your friend tells you about her test results, it means listening properly, with your mind on her and not on your own fear. All of these reach the other person and make some difference to their life.

Worrying, in the sense of this book, happens in your head at two in the morning. Your father doesn't know about it, and it does nothing for his heart. Your daughter's car isn't made safer by your sitting

up. If she could see you, she wouldn't feel loved so much as guilty, and she might start telling you less about her plans. That's a common result. The children of heavy worriers often learn to edit what they report, to protect the parent. The worrier then knows less about the child's life and has less chance to help.

And when the worry does reach the other person, it doesn't always arrive as love. Often it arrives as pressure. "Are you sure you should take that job?" "You're not going to cycle in this weather, are you?" To the person on the other end, it can sound like a lack of confidence in them. Some of them hear "I don't think you can manage". That's not what you mean at all, but it's what gets through.

The objection I hear most often goes like this. "My mother worried about me constantly, and that's how I knew she loved me." I believe it. But I'd ask what, specifically, you remember with warmth. I'd guess it's the things she did. She waited up with the kettle on, or sent a parcel to your first flat. She turned up when things went wrong. Those were acts. The hours she lay awake did nothing for you, and they cost her a good deal. You could keep the acts and spare yourself the hours, and nobody you love would be any worse off.

There's also a social side. In some groups of friends and some workplaces, trading worries is how people bond. "Aren't you worried about the restructure?" "I'm terrified about secondary school places." If you stop joining in with the same energy, you may feel you're being cold. You don't have to make a show of it. You can be interested in someone's concern, and kind about it, without taking it home with you.

So here's a way to translate a worry into care. When you notice one about someone you love, ask whether there's anything you could do for them this week. If there is, do it, and let that be how your love shows. If there isn't, because they're an adult and it's their life and their drive home, then for now the caring thing may be to trust them. Trust is one of the ways love gets shown, and when you worry about someone all the time they don't get much of it.

"I've always been a worrier"

"I'm a born worrier. My mum was the same, and her mum. It's just how I'm made."

Part of this is true and I'll say so plainly. People differ in temperament from early in life, and some are more easily alarmed than others. Anxiety problems run in families, and studies of twins put roughly a third of the difference between people down to genes. Children also pick up a good deal from watching an anxious parent. If you come from a line of worriers, you probably do have a more sensitive alarm than most. I can't change that, and you shouldn't expect this book to turn you into someone who never gives tomorrow a thought.

But "I'm a worrier" combines two things. One is the alarm, meaning how easily the first "what if" goes off. The other is what you do in the minutes and hours after it goes off. The first may well be temperament. The second is an activity, and it looks very much like a learned one.

Look at the features it has. It's mostly made of words, which means you're producing it. A startle reflex doesn't work that way. It has favourite times, usually in bed, in the car, in the shower, and in any gap with nothing else in it. It has favourite subjects. You worry about your children's health and not at all about your own pension, or the other way round, and your sister worries about the opposite things. A trait you were born with wouldn't pick and choose like that. Most telling of all, it can be interrupted. When the phone

rings with something absorbing, the round stops, and it doesn't always start again. So it turns out to depend on the time of day, on the subject, and on whether anything else has your attention.

Anything with those features can be reshaped by practice, and there's evidence that worry can. In 2013 Sarah Kate McGowan and Evelyn Behar took 53 people who worried a great deal and randomly gave half of them a simple routine for two weeks. They were to confine their worrying to one thirty-minute period a day, at a set time and place, and postpone any worry that turned up outside it. The other half were told to let their worry run without avoiding it. After two weeks the first group had larger drops in worry, anxiety and insomnia. It was a small, short study and the authors call it preliminary. The idea itself goes back to 1983, when Borkovec first tested it. Chapter 11 uses it.

That result would be strange if worrying were simply how some people are made, because you can't give a fixed trait an appointment and have it turn up on time. It appears you can with a habit.

One more piece of research belongs here, because it explains why the usual advice has failed you. People have told you to stop thinking about it, and you've tried, and it got worse. In 1987 Daniel Wegner asked volunteers not to think of a white bear for five minutes, and to ring a bell if they did. They couldn't manage it. Afterwards, when they were allowed to think of it, they thought about it more than people who'd never been asked to suppress it. A later analysis of many such studies found that the rebound is real, though small to moderate, and that it varies with the kind of thought.

So if you've tried to push worries out of your mind and failed, you didn't fail through lack of willpower. You were using a method that doesn't work well for anybody. Nothing in the next chapter asks you to suppress a thought. It asks you to do one of two things with it, and neither of them is to push it away.

You may always have the sensitive alarm. I'd even say it has its uses, since people with sensitive alarms notice the expiring passport and the odd noise from the boiler before anyone else does. The aim is to keep the alarm and drop the hours of ringing that follow it.

The decision

Everything so far has been argument. This chapter is the practical part. I'll put the decision in one sentence and then explain how it works.

When a what-if arrives, I either take a step or give it an appointment.

Those are the only two options, and neither of them is a round. If there's something you can do about the concern, you do it, or you write down when you will. If there's nothing you can do, the thought gets postponed to a fixed time later in the day, and you go back to what you were doing. You don't argue with the thought or try to suppress it, and you don't follow it either.

The method has six parts. Therapists will recognise most of them, since they're adapted from standard cognitive behavioural work on worry. The notes say where each comes from.

Catch it and write it down. When you notice you're in a round, or about to be, put the worry into one line as a prediction. "I'll be criticised in Thursday's chat." A worry that's vague and endless in your head becomes one sentence on paper, and one sentence is much easier to deal with. This is the log from chapter 4, and you've already started it.

Ask whether there's a step. It's a single question, which is whether there's anything you can do about this, today or on a day you can name. Be strict with yourself. "Think about it more" isn't a step. A step is a physical act that you could tick off. It might be to ring the

engineer, ask the manager what the chat is about, book the GP appointment, look up the passport renewal time, or move two hundred pounds into the savings account.

If there's a step, take it or date it. Do the smallest version now if you can. If you can't, write down when you will. "Ring engineer, Monday 9am." Then you're finished with that worry until Monday. If it comes back in the meantime, the answer is "that's dealt with on Monday", and you don't need to go over it again. A worry that's been turned into a dated step often loses most of its force on the spot, because the alarm has done its job.

One kind of step needs a special mention. If the worry is about a symptom in your body, the step is an appointment with a doctor. Searching online isn't a substitute for that, and neither is another week of monitoring it. One appointment will settle more than forty evenings of reading. If you're afraid of what you'll be told, that's understandable, but the fear is there whether you go or not.

If there's no step, give it an appointment. Choose a fixed time each day, fifteen to twenty minutes, in the same place. The study in chapter 10 used thirty minutes, and you can too. Don't hold it in bed or in the hour before bed. A kitchen table at six o'clock is good. That's the worry slot. When a what-if turns up outside it and there's no step to take, you say to yourself "not now, at six", add it to the list if it isn't there, and turn back to what's in front of you. This isn't suppression, which the white bear study showed doesn't work. With suppression you tell yourself never to think of the thing. Here you've given it a time, and that turns out to be much easier to live with. Your mind will let go of something it knows it'll come back to.

Keep the appointment. At six, sit down with the list and a pen and go through it. You'll find that a good half of the day's items have gone flat. At eleven that morning they seemed urgent, and by six you can hardly remember why. Cross those off. For the ones that remain, do three things in writing. Write down the worst that could happen, then what's most likely to happen, then what you'd do the next morning if the worst came. That last one is chapter 7's exercise. If a step occurs to you while you're writing, date it. When the time is up, stop, even if you're in the middle of a thought. You'll have another slot tomorrow. Some days you'll sit down and find there's nothing on the list worth the time. In that case, close the notebook and go and do something else.

Check the log weekly. Once a week, mark the predictions that have come due, with a tick or a cross and a word on how bad it was. After a month you'll have your own version of the study in chapter 4, with your own percentage. I don't know what it will be. I'd be surprised if it's far from theirs.

Here's the whole thing applied to the chat on Thursday. On Friday afternoon your manager asks for a chat and the first what-if fires. You write, "She'll criticise my work on Thursday." You ask if there's a step, and there is. You could ask her. "Happy to. Is there anything I should bring or think about beforehand?" It takes fifteen seconds. Either she tells you it's about Leeds, and the weekend is yours, or she says "no, nothing", which tells you nothing, and that's fine. There's no further step. The worry goes on the list. On Saturday at the birthday party it comes back, and you tell it "six o'clock". At six you write that the worst is a formal warning, that the most likely

thing is some routine request, and that if it's a warning you'll ask for the specifics in writing and talk to a colleague you trust. That takes four minutes. On Thursday you mark the log with a cross.

A few plans made in advance help, because rounds start at predictable moments. Research on plans in "when, then" form suggests they improve follow-through. These are three I'd suggest.

When I notice a what-if in bed, then I'll write one line on the pad beside me and leave it for the slot.

When I want to check the phone or look up a symptom a second time, then I'll write the worry down and won't check.

When I catch myself halfway through a round, then I'll ask the test question from chapter 2 and get up and do one physical task.

The last one matters more than it looks. After you've postponed a worry, your attention needs somewhere to go, and "nowhere in particular" will lead straight back. Give it something with some grip, such as the washing-up, a walk to the postbox, or the conversation that's going on in front of you.

As for what to expect, the first week feels artificial. The slot seems silly, and some worries won't wait for it. That's normal, and you just go on postponing them. Worries will keep arriving, because the alarm hasn't changed and wasn't supposed to. What usually changes over a few weeks is how long each one stays. I can't promise you a figure or a timetable. The method is a package of my own assembly. Its parts have evidence behind them, but nobody

has tested the package. What I can say is that it costs twenty minutes a day at most, and you can check whether it's working from your own log.

When it does come

Sooner or later one of the ticks in your log will be a big one. The scan isn't clear, or the redundancy is real, or the phone call does come. About one worry in eleven came true in the study in chapter 4, and over a lifetime that adds up to a fair number of bad days. A book about worry that ignored this would deserve to be thrown across the room.

The first thing the habit will say is "See? I was right to worry." It's worth answering this properly, because it's the moment when a lot of people give up and go back to worrying full time.

The fact that it happened shows the concern was valid. It doesn't show the worrying helped. To judge that, ask what you actually used when the blow landed. Usually it was practical things, such as the savings, the friend who knew an employment lawyer, the insurance policy, and the early appointment that caught it at a stage when it could be treated. Every one of those was a step. Somebody took them at some point, in a few minutes or a few hours. Then ask what the rounds contributed. I mean the hundred evenings of rehearsal, and how many of their scripted conversations you ended up using. The usual answer is none, because the real event had particulars no rehearsal had guessed. The meeting was in a different room, with different words, and your reaction wasn't the one you'd practised.

Often the event wasn't on the list in the first place. You worried for a year about your job and it was your knee that went. That shouldn't persuade you to worry more widely. What it shows is that

lookout duty can't cover every direction, and general readiness does better. A person with some savings and a few good friends, in reasonable health, who has the habit of dealing with things promptly, is prepared for a great many events they never thought of. They're better prepared than the person who spent those years on detailed rehearsals of a few.

Once it's happened, it's no longer a what-if. You now have a problem, and as chapter 7 said, a problem comes with particulars. There are people to ring and forms to fill in and decisions with dates on them. The rule from chapter 11 still applies, and now there are plenty of steps to take. Many worriers find, to their own surprise, that they're good in a real crisis. They're calm and organised and useful. I don't think that's a paradox. A crisis gives the mind what worry never does, which is something definite to work on.

There's a harder case, which is the long wait. You've had the biopsy and the result takes two weeks. The company has announced cuts and the names come out next month. Your mother has been given a diagnosis that will unfold over years. Here the bad thing is partly real already and the uncertainty may last a long time. This isn't the everyday worrying the rest of the book describes, and I don't want to be glib about it.

A few things still hold. Take whatever steps exist, and take them early. That might mean the questions written down for the consultant, the CV brought up to date, or the conversation with your brother about who does what. Keep the slot, because a long wait produces more what-ifs than any other situation and they'll fill all the hours you allow them. And don't expect to feel fine. The

bar exam study in chapter 6 found that nothing people tried made the waiting itself comfortable. It's normal to feel dread during a real wait for serious news, and it doesn't mean the method has failed. The aim in those weeks is modest. You want some hours each day when you're in your own life and not in the waiting room, and you won't get more than that.

Be careful, too, about what you say to yourself afterwards if the news is bad. "I should have worried more" is almost never true. "I should have gone to the doctor sooner" is sometimes true, and what it regrets is a step you didn't take. If you feel any regret when you look back, you'll nearly always find it's about a step.

When the worrying comes back

It will. At some point you'll have a week when the slot gets skipped and the log lies unopened. There you are at two in the morning on the fifteenth lap of the same subject, as if you'd never read a word of this. I'd like you to know in advance that this is ordinary, so that when it happens you'll recognise it.

There are predictable triggers. Tiredness is the biggest, because a tired mind starts rounds more easily and is worse at leaving them. Illness does it, and so does drinking, particularly the morning after. Big changes do it, such as a new baby, a move or a new job, since they throw up real uncertainties by the dozen. Bad news that happens to someone else can do it as well. A friend's diagnosis sends you to check your own body, and you've started again.

When it happens, the response is small and undramatic. At the next convenient moment, write the current worries down, one line each. Ask of each whether there's a step. Date the steps. Put the rest in tomorrow's slot. You're back. You haven't lost your progress, because there's no streak to lose. I'd advise against counting worry-free days at all. When you count days, one bad night feels like a collapse, and then you start worrying about that.

That last problem, worrying about worrying, has been given a lot of weight by the psychologist Adrian Wells in his account of chronic worry. People move from "what if I lose my job" to "what if I can't stop worrying, what if it's damaging my health, what if I'm losing my mind". This second layer can be worse than the first. If you recognise it, two things may help. Worrying is unpleasant and

it costs you time, but a round of it isn't a sign that you're losing your mind, and it does end. And you've just read ten chapters arguing that it's a habit with understandable payoffs, not a sign that something is wrong with you. It doesn't deserve to be feared as well.

I'll say a little about the night, since that's where many people do most of their worrying. Your judgment is at its worst at that hour. A problem that looks impossible at three will look like an errand at nine. You can't solve anything from bed anyway, because no step can be taken until morning. So the when-then plan from chapter 11 matters most here. Keep a pad by the bed. Write one line and tell yourself it's on the list for six o'clock. If you're still awake and going round after a while, get up, sit somewhere else with a dull book, and go back when you're sleepy. If you lie there wrestling with it, your mind learns to treat bed as the place for wrestling.

Now the limits of a book. Self-help is a reasonable place to start with worry. The national guidance for England treats it as an early option for generalised anxiety disorder. But it's only one step among several, and you should move to the next if you need to. I'd see a GP, or refer yourself to a talking therapies service if you live in England, in any of these cases.

You've worried on most days for six months or more and you can't control it. It's affecting your work, your sleep or your relationships. You have physical symptoms that trouble you, such as a racing heart, dizziness, stomach problems or constant tension. You've had sudden attacks of intense fear. Your mood has been low for weeks, or you've had thoughts of harming yourself, in which case don't

wait for a routine appointment but get urgent help the same day. Or you've given the method in this book an honest month and nothing has moved.

You shouldn't think of any of these as a failure. They tell you which kind of help fits. The treatments are well established. Cognitive behavioural therapy and a method called applied relaxation are the two talking treatments the English guidance recommends, and there are medications that help many people. If you're already taking medication, keep taking it as prescribed, and talk to your doctor before changing anything.

If you do see a therapist, you'll find that much of what they teach is already familiar from these pages, and you'll be starting a few steps ahead.

The next what-if

Find the piece of paper from chapter 1, with the three predictions on it. If any of them has come due, mark it with a tick or a cross. If one of them still has a step you haven't taken, take it today or write down the day you will. Whatever is left goes to six o'clock.

That's most of what this book has to teach, and you've just done it in a couple of minutes.

The next what-if is probably not far off, perhaps later today. It will feel, as they always do, like the exception, the one that really does need thinking through at length. It will carry the old feeling that to let it go would be careless. You now know where that feeling comes from and what its record is like.

Ask your one question. If there's a step, take it, and know that you've done what a prepared person does. If there isn't, give the thing its appointment and go back to whatever's in front of you, whether that's a meal or a person or a piece of work. The thing you were worrying about hasn't happened yet, and most of the time it won't.

You'll still have concerns, because your life has people and things in it that you don't want to lose. I hope you keep every one of them. The rounds are what you can give up. You can stop paying for disasters in advance, and spend the time on the ordinary days you're living through now.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor or therapist who knows your situation.

I've kept sources out of the chapters so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes the split between the concern and the worrying in chapter 1, the list of payments and costs in chapter 2, the alarm and the pen test in chapter 3, the argument about unworried events in chapter 5, and all of chapter 9.

A general caution applies to most of what follows. Much of the research on worry has been done with people who have generalised anxiety disorder, or with students who score high on worry questionnaires. I've applied it to everyday worrying. I think that's reasonable, since the studies that included both ordinary and severe worriers mostly found the same patterns in each. But it is a step beyond what the studies tested.

Chapter 2. The reasons people give for worrying are from Borkovec and Roemer, "Perceived functions of worry among generalized anxiety disorder subjects", *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 26, 1995, pages 25 to 30. The participants were students. The group with severe worry stood out for a further reason, which was that worrying distracted them from more emotional topics. The finding that worry is mostly thoughts and not images is from Borkovec and Inz, "The nature of

worry in generalized anxiety disorder: a predominance of thought activity", Behaviour Research and Therapy 28, 1990, pages 153 to 158. The idea that worry works as a way of avoiding emotional imagery is offered in that paper as a speculation. It has been developed since but it remains a theory.

Chapter 3. Watkins, "Constructive and unconstructive repetitive thought", Psychological Bulletin 134, 2008, pages 163 to 206. Level of thinking is one of three factors he identifies. The other two are whether the content is positive or negative, and the person's circumstances. Llera and Newman, "Worry impairs the problem-solving process: results from an experimental study", Behaviour Research and Therapy 135, 2020, article 103759. There were 185 participants, about half of them high worriers. The drop in confidence was found only in the high worriers. The drop in rated effectiveness was found in everyone. Davey, "Worrying, social problem-solving abilities, and social problem-solving confidence", Behaviour Research and Therapy 32, 1994, pages 327 to 330. A similar result with patients is in Ladouceur, Blais, Freeston and Dugas, Journal of Anxiety Disorders 12, 1998, pages 139 to 152.

Chapter 4. LaFreniere and Newman, "Exposing worry's deceit: percentage of untrue worries in generalized anxiety disorder treatment", Behavior Therapy 51, 2020, pages 413 to 423. The summary of the paper gives 91.4 per cent of worries as not coming true, and its table gives 91.3. The average per person was 89.6 per cent. There were 26 women and 3 men. The authors list the small sample, the narrow group of participants, and the restriction to short-term worries as limits. They also note that participants judged for themselves whether a worry had come true. The authors

mention two earlier counts, reported briefly by Borkovec, Hazlett-Stevens and Diaz in 1999. In one, about 68 per cent of worries didn't come true, and in the other, 85 per cent turned out better than expected. Neither went through peer review, so I haven't used them in the chapter. You may have seen the 85 per cent figure quoted elsewhere without that caveat.

Chapter 5. Freeston, Rhéaume, Letarte, Dugas and Ladouceur, "Why do people worry?", *Personality and Individual Differences* 17, 1994, pages 791 to 802. The description of relief as a reward for worrying, and the word superstitious, are from Borkovec's work as summarised in Newman and Llera's 2011 review, listed under chapter 6. The argument from the events you didn't worry about is mine. So is the observation that the worst events often come from an unwatched direction. I know of no study that has counted that.

Chapter 6. Newman and Llera, "A novel theory of experiential avoidance in generalized anxiety disorder: a review and synthesis of research supporting a contrast avoidance model of worry", *Clinical Psychology Review* 31, 2011, pages 371 to 382. It's a theory with supporting studies, and other theories of worry compete with it. Sweeny, Reynolds, Falkenstein, Andrews and Dooley, "Two definitions of waiting well", *Emotion* 16, 2016, pages 129 to 143. Sweeny and Krizan, "Sobering up: a quantitative review of temporal declines in expectations", *Psychological Bulletin* 139, 2013, pages 702 to 724. The conclusion that bracing is best left until late is my reading of the two papers together, and the authors don't put it that way. Norem and Cantor, "Defensive pessimism: harnessing anxiety as motivation", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51, 1986, pages 1208 to 1217.

Chapter 7. Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg and Wheatley, "Immune neglect: a source of durability bias in affective forecasting", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, 1998, pages 617 to 638. The studies show that people overestimate how long they'll feel bad. They don't show that bad events are painless, and they didn't include the most severe losses a person can suffer.

Chapter 8. Dugas, Gagnon, Ladouceur and Freeston, "Generalized anxiety disorder: a preliminary test of a conceptual model", *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 36, 1998, pages 215 to 226, which compared 24 patients with 20 other people. The experiment is Ladouceur, Gosselin and Dugas, "Experimental manipulation of intolerance of uncertainty", *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 38, 2000, pages 933 to 941. The trial is Ladouceur, Dugas, Freeston, Léger, Gagnon and Thibodeau, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 68, 2000, pages 957 to 964. Twenty of the 26 patients no longer met the criteria after treatment. The comparison group was a waiting list, which is an easy comparison to win. The list of small uncertainties to practise on is mine, in the spirit of their treatment.

Chapter 10. The twin study figure is from Hettema, Neale and Kendler, "A review and meta-analysis of the genetic epidemiology of anxiety disorders", *American Journal of Psychiatry* 158, 2001, pages 1568 to 1578, which put the heritability of generalised anxiety disorder at 0.32. The authors say the part played by family environment is uncertain. McGowan and Behar, "A preliminary investigation of stimulus control training for worry", *Behavior Modification* 37, 2013, pages 90 to 112. The original is Borkovec, Wilkinson, Folensbee and Lerman, "Stimulus control applications to the treatment of worry", *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 21,

1983, pages 247 to 251. Wegner, Schneider, Carter and White, "Paradoxical effects of thought suppression", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53, 1987, pages 5 to 13. The later analysis is Abramowitz, Tolin and Street, *Clinical Psychology Review* 21, 2001, pages 683 to 703.

Chapter 11. The worry slot is the stimulus control method above. The log is a simplified form of the worry outcome journal used by LaFreniere and Newman. The question about whether there's a step is a common tool in cognitive behavioural therapy, where it's often drawn as a diagram called a worry tree. Writing down the worst, the most likely and what you'd do is also standard practice in that therapy. Plans in "when, then" form are from Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The six-part method as a whole is mine and hasn't been tested as a package by anyone.

Chapter 13. Worry about worry is a central part of Adrian Wells's account, set out in "Meta-cognition and worry: a cognitive model of generalized anxiety disorder", *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy* 23, 1995, pages 301 to 320. The advice on when to seek help follows the NHS page on generalised anxiety disorder and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guideline CG113, "Generalised anxiety disorder and panic disorder in adults: management", published in 2011 and last updated in 2020. Both are written for England, and services differ elsewhere. The advice about getting out of bed when you can't sleep is a standard part of behavioural treatment for insomnia.