

Stand Up to Worry

Thom Rutledge, author of *Embracing Fear*



Tacked and taped in various places around my therapy office are little cards, each with a sentence or two intended to provoke a little thought. My clients call them "nutshells." One of the cards reads, "Worry is a choice." This one has probably brought more objections than any of the other nutshells. Some people tell me that they are "just not sure about that one;" others simply tell me that they disagree; a few seem to be genuinely offended at the suggestion that they have the choice not to worry; and on occasion someone will argue that worry is productive.

Worry is a choice. I believe this.

Does that mean that I don't worry? Ask anyone who knows me: the answer is definitely no. I do worry. In fact, I am very good at it. I come from a family of championship worriers, or I would if there were such championships. I have spent --- and continue to spend --- energy, time and money on learning how to make the choice to not worry. It is a tough habit to break. It makes smoking cessation seem like a breeze.

I have certainly made significant progress through the years, but I imagine that I might be working on this one for the rest of my time on this earth. I have come to accept this and therefore don't worry about it.

People disagree with the statement "worry is a choice," because they don't know how to stop worrying. There is absolutely no doubt that the experience of worry is that it has a life all its own and is outside our sphere of control. When is the last time you had some spare time and said to yourself, "I think I'll take a few minutes and think of some things to worry about."? Of course, we don't have to do that because the worry-guy on our committee is a real go-getter, a self-starter with lots of energy and even more imagination.

Now that I think about it, maybe worry isn't a choice. Maybe it is in theory, but in the real world, with our real minds, we are going to worry whether we like it or not. Now, of course, I am worrying about the possibility of this whole article being a sham.

"There you go again, Thom," my worry-guy says to me, "preaching to the masses about sh—you know nothing about. You couldn't stop worrying if you tried."

Right there is where my worry-guy makes his mistake --- telling me that it is impossible to stop worrying. I know from personal experience that that is not true. I may still have a long way to go, maybe even a lifetime of work ahead of me, but that does not negate the fact that I have been able to stop worrying.

Here are some of the ways I have been able to successfully interrupt my worrying:

1. I have thought enough about worry to come to the conclusion that it is useless. Worry serves no positive function. Legitimate healthy fear is entirely different. Healthy fear energizes us to take action to avoid danger or correct mistakes. Worry does the opposite of energizing us; worry wears on us, draining us of valuable energy. Reminding myself that worry is useless helps me to release my attachment to it. So I say to myself, "Worry is useless."

2. I specifically focus my attention on the energy that is being drained from me when I worry. Worry causes serious energy leaks, gaping holes in the walls of our consciousness. Worry is thought that is stuck in either the past or the future. I remind myself that energy can only be productive in the present. So I say to myself, "Worry is a fuel leak."

3. I enlist a specific and very simple technique to plug the energy leak. I imagine myself standing at the head of the long conference table that furnishes the room where my inner committee meets. I imagine the worry-guy approaching me. He tends to walk fast and he talks incessantly. Just as he gets within about three feet from me, chattering away, listing my worries, describing frightening scenarios, I hold my hand up and say, "Not now!" I may say this in the privacy of my own chaotic mind if I am standing in line at the grocery store, but if I am alone I tend to speak aloud. "Not now!" I say it, and I say it with authority. That sometimes takes some practice, but it is essential that we speak this with authority. Directly beneath those two words — not now --- must be the clear message that says, "I'm in charge here; not you." Again, this takes some practice, but what doesn't?

4. And finally I remind myself to be realistic. Even if worry is not a choice, I know that I do have the choice to claim my authority and say "not now." I remind myself that there is no limit to how many times I repeat "not now." Since the worry-guy is not respectful of boundaries, he does not admit defeat easily. Being in charge of my life is easier on some days than others. Sometimes the worry-guy will not shut up no matter what. On those days I remind myself that even if I spend an entire day chanting "not now, not now, not now," that day will be better spent than it would have been if I had just been consumed by worry. Progress, not perfection, right?

It is all just one more lesson in how we might do this radical thing, this thing called "being in charge of our own lives."

Thom Rutledge is a psychotherapist in Nashville, Tennessee. He is the author of several books, including *Embracing Fear* (HarperCollins) and is co-author (with Jenni Schaefer) of *Life Without Ed* (McGraw-Hill). He has been featured on The Today Show, Fox News, CNN, and has consulted with The Dr. Phil Show. His books have been translated into several foreign languages, and he is recognized internationally as an informative, inspirational and entertaining speaker. For more information about Thom's work, visit www.thomrutledge.com or join him on Facebook: www.facebook.com/thom.rutledge.9.