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Why We Worry!

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The American Psychological Association recently revealed that more than 80% of Americans are **worried** about the economy and that 46% of this group is **worried** about their ability to provide basic needs for their families. The same day this information was released (April 27th), ABC News reported that fear of the H1N1 virus had become the nation's latest **worry**. So since many of us devote a lot of time engaging in **worry**, it might be helpful to examine what it is, why we do it and perhaps most importantly, how to stop it!

Counselors define “worry” as anticipatory fear of painful or negative events that may occur in the future. Another definition of “worry” is unproductive, self-inflicted pain. These observations about the futility of worry are not new. In 1588, Montaigne wrote in *Essays* that “He who fears he will suffer, already suffers what he fears.” Like most things in life, worry comes in degrees. Minimal worry (little concerns) causes the least amount of anxiety and often exists below the radar of our daily lives. But at the other end of the spectrum, aggravated worry can dominate the radar and become disruptive. This type of “worry on steroids” is sometimes referred to as catastrophizing. Unlike little concerns which we believe *may* happen, someone who is catastrophizing is convinced that the worst possible outcome is inevitable and definitely *will* happen. Catastrophic worry is not only extremely uncomfortable; it also brings with it a whole series of negatives, including:

- Joylessness – While busy with extreme worry, we project ourselves into a frightened state of mind that sucks all the joy and happiness from our lives. Yet only the present is real. The catastrophic future we project is a fiction.
- Disease – Chronic worriers drive up their blood pressure every time they entertain dark thoughts of a foreboding future.
- Isolation – People learn to avoid chronic worriers because they drag us down. Yet isolation is the great incubator where little concerns can morph into catastrophic worry.
- Confirmation bias – Whenever a catastrophizer hears a news report about the economy or the flu “pandemic,” his/her morbid fears become reinforced and the cycle of joylessness, disease and isolation continues and indeed is amplified.

William Glasser, M.D. suggests that many common problems, including excessive worry, can be overcome by affirmatively strengthening relationships with others. A principal component of Dr. Glasser’s Reality Therapy includes having a “confidant” – someone with whom we can share our concerns and from whom we in turn receive respect and validation. (*Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom*, Harper Collins, 1998) If you have a confidant in your life, you are indeed fortunate and probably don’t spend a lot of time in chronic worry. But in the absence of such an individual, we invite you to establish contact with a friendly counselor at your Employee Assistance Program. A listening ear, professional guidance and freedom from unproductive worry are just a phone call away!