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Think Outside The Box

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The Worry Box Technique

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The “Worry Box” is an incredibly straightforward and efficient technique to help you get rid of intrusive thoughts.

Some people feel fine throughout the day and in the evenings. They manage their tasks and enjoy a decent mix of work and play, which makes their days pleasant. However, while trying to fall asleep, they may get intrusive, obsessive thoughts. As an expected consequence, they get anxious, and the sweet slumber seems to slip further and further away, while their minds are in turmoil.

The banner features the Explorable logo and the text "Quiz Time!". Below the logo are three quiz cards:

- Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2 (Image: Roller skates)
- Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2 (Image: Colored pencils)
- Quiz: Flags in Europe (Image: Ferris wheel)

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Can You Relate?

If you can identify with this example, the Worry Box technique might be just for you. If you don't fit into this description but still have a hard time managing your thoughts and being able to relax from time to time, try it over a couple of nights and see what happens.

The Goals of the Technique

This technique's objective is that you focus on the present moment, and only deal with your worries at the appropriate time.

Perhaps when you go to bed, you tend to think about all the stuff you've got to be involved in, such as challenging work assignments, difficult situations with loved ones, global issues, etc. It may then come a time when you associate bedtime with the negative experience of these thoughts. In other words, you worry about worrying. Apparently, that can leave anyone sad or frustrated. Hence the following simple technique.

Worry at a Set Time

If you struggle with obsessive thoughts and worries, telling yourself to stop can easily backfire, and you might end up feeling defeated when it doesn't have to happen that way. Instead, set a particular time to think about what's troubling you and how can you solve it. Schedule your worrying time and don't let that be interrupted by anything else.

Sometimes we need to worry, and the more you command yourself not to, the more your worries stick to your mind. Knowing that you will have a specific time to worry, means you won't be bothered by these negative thought at inappropriate times, and yet you'll give them the necessary space.

Schedule Carefully

Have your "worry time" at the same hour every day, or at least as close to it as you can get. If you are not sure which time of the day would help you feel most at ease, then try a few options and see which one fits in best with your other tasks and needs. However, it is crucial that you always keep a few hours of distance between schedules worrying and bed time, since otherwise, you might not be able to relax.

Reflect

During scheduled worry sessions, think about what's troubling you and answer the following questions about each situation. Remember that the only purpose of this exercise is to help yourself and all of your answers will remain private. Therefore, you can only benefit from being as honest and positive as possible.

- Is the situation that stresses you out in your control?
- What can you do about it?
- Is this something you're currently facing or a hypothetical situation?
- Is this worry a cognitive distortion (unhelpful thinking)? If so, use your newly acquired knowledge to challenge it.

Example of Reflection

Just as an example, let's say you're worried about your health, which is a common recurrent source of anxiety. Your notes would, more or less, look something like this:

The worry:

I fear for my health. Sometimes I think I might have an undiagnosed illness.

Is the situation in your control?

To a large degree, it is, because I cannot diagnose myself and stop nature from running its course.

What can you do about it?

Eat a balanced diet, exercise often, sleep better and bring more positivity into my life. Moreover, I can get routine check-ups, without obsessively visiting doctors' offices.

Is this something you're currently facing or a hypothetical situation?

It's hypothetical because, as of the moment, I don't feel sick, just nervous that I might get sick someday.

Is this worry a cognitive distortion?

Yes, I'm filtering out the positive since I am in good shape right now, and my lifestyle is rather healthy.

Put Your Worries in a Box

Whenever you experience a worrisome thought, write it down and place it in a box, or a file on your computer. Get back to those worries, during your scheduled time. Even the act of writing down a worry can be very helpful. Whenever you solve a worry, mark it as done. To carry on with our example, once you get the results of the medical check-up, mark it with a smiley face or another positive symbol, and take it out of the box.

When You Can't Resolve It

If the worry that bothers you the most is something you can't solve, write it down as well. Make an effort and try and come to terms with the fact that it's out of your control. Uncertainty is a part of life and the only thing you can sometimes do, is work towards your own positive and realistic reactions, to negative circumstances.

Clear Your Mind

Keeping your worries inside a box and allowing yourself to worry only at certain times, will give your mind space at night. If you've got a specific time to worry and create solutions, you don't need to worry at night.

What If It Doesn't Work?

If you ever notice feeling annoyed by mental intrusions, despite applying this technique, take a breather and ask yourself:

What is happening right now at this very moment?

Focus on the present sensations. Worries are either about upcoming events - what-ifs, or about the past. Consider the fact that right now you're alive and breathing, which is a treasure in itself, but also meant that you can always improve your life. Everything that worries you will still be there tomorrow, but you will be different: you'll be rested and energized.

“Always say 'yes' to the present moment... Surrender to what is. Say 'yes' to life - and see how life starts suddenly to start working for you rather than against you.”

~Eckhart Tolle

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