

When Worrying Becomes Harmful

by Steven Wilson, Ed.D.

“It is quite possible, and medically proven, that one can literally worry themselves sick,” said Dr. Joe Rieman, medical director of The Children’s Home. “There is obviously a need for increased vigilance and precaution right now but excessive worrying can often lead to other health problems.”

Dr. Rieman said extreme worrying can cause the body to react in unexpected ways including high anxiety and physical illness.



“This is a stressful time for everyone and I think any reasonable person understands that,” said Dr. Rieman. “But when we experience chronic worry the body naturally increases blood sugar levels and triglycerides through stress hormones like cortisol. An excessive amount of these hormones can actually increase symptoms like fatigue, increased heart rate, headaches; nausea...the list is extensive.

“When the excessive fuel being pumped into our blood, due to stress, isn’t burned off by physical activity, things like coronary artery disease, digestive disorders, immune system problems and, in the most extreme cases, heart attacks are known to be linked to this occurrence,” he said.

During periods of elevated strain, what can a person do to combat the effects of stress?

“From a mental health standpoint, it’s sometimes best to minimize news coverage after you have the latest information and purposefully not let yourself be consumed by it,” advises Debbie Gingrich, vice president of behavioral health at The Children’s Home. “It’s also often helpful to consider social media purely as a tool to engage families and loved ones. During heightened tensions, it’s often not the best tool to consider as a news source.”

Gingrich said while a certain amount of worry during uncertain times is natural; there are self-care steps that most anyone can take to help alleviate some of the apprehension.

“We do ourselves a powerful service when we note our own limitations or acknowledge there is some uncertainty we just have to accept,” Gingrich said. “Working through and controlling the things that we can control is always a better idea health-wise than worrying to the point where we fall ill ourselves and can’t care of the ones who depend on us.”

Gingrich said some useful tools include eating healthy, exercise with doctor’s approval, maintaining a strong social network and engage it often and consider even some self-policing techniques.

“The humble rubber band can actually be a simple tool,” she said. “Place it on your wrist and give it a pop every time you start to excessively worry about things you can’t control to remind you to say, ‘I got this.’”



The vice president of behavioral health at The Children’s Home says a simple rubber band can be a self-reminder to help not to excessively worry about things outside one’s realm of control.

“But, if you feel anxiety or worry is adversely affecting your life or your health, then absolutely call a professional for help,” she said.