

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

Hi everyone, I'm Dr. Marie Murphy. I'm a relationship coach and I help people who are engaging in anything they think counts as infidelity to deal with their feelings, clarify what they want, and make decisions about what they're going to do. No shame, no blame, no judgments. Infidelity situations can seem VERY confusing and overwhelming in so many different ways, for so many different reasons, and it can be really easy to get lost in our own unhelpful patterns of thinking. Today we're going to talk a little bit about how you can deal with your own unhelpful patterns of thinking, but one of the greatest things about working with a coach is that a good coach can help you get out of your unhelpful patterns of thinking a lot more efficiently than you can on your own. If you are ready to get un-stuck, if you are ready to start thinking about your infidelity situation in a different way, let's work together. You can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. I offer confidential, compassionate coaching via Zoom, which means we can work together no matter where you're located.

Okay. One of the great things about being human is that we have these very sophisticated, fancy brains that are capable of doing all sorts of things for us. Our minds are these really powerful machines, if you will, and when we put them to use in the right ways, they can do amazing things for us.

But so often, we let our minds run wild and have their wicked way with us. Ever heard the saying, "The mind makes a wonderful servant, but a terrible master?" I'm pretty sure I offered you this quote in a fairly recent episode of this podcast, actually. That line is attributed to Robin Sharma but the idea is a very old one. Here's another very old comment on the nature of our minds: the mind is like a drunken monkey that has been stung by a scorpion, and spooked by a ghost.

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

We tend to let our minds run the show for us, and what that often means is, we don't relate to things we're concerned about in a particularly productive way. If something is going on in our lives that we want to address, we worry. And we may entertain multiple worries at the same time. And instead of slowing down and systematically addressing whatever it is we're concerned about, we may jump from topic to topic in our mind, or engage in catastrophic thinking, or attempt to solve big, complex problems in one fell swoop.

And these are common, normal mental tendencies. There's nothing wrong with you if you've been thinking in any of these ways. But the problem with these ways of thinking is that they are not terribly helpful. If you want to actually solve a problem, worrying is not going to help you do it, letting your mind jump from topic to topic isn't going to help you do it, and neither will considering worst-case scenarios, OR attempting to figure everything out all at once.

A big part of what I help people do as a coach is manage and organize their thinking. I can't do this FOR you, but I can teach you how to do it, and with practice, you can become adept at managing your mind, and this will help you deal with your infidelity situation AND enhance your overall quality of life considerably. An unmanaged mind can be a source of great stress and suffering. When we learn how to manage our minds, life gets a lot simpler and a lot better. That's not to say that we never experience any kind of discomfort. No way. But we can minimize our suffering and struggling considerably.

Learning how to manage our minds is a process that consists of different specific practices. One element of managing our minds is becoming aware of what we are thinking about. This sounds simple, and it is, but it's incredibly important. So often, we aren't really aware of what we're

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

thinking. If an idea has floated through our mind, we may regard it as some sort of truth, or some helpful or important bit of information that we need to pay attention to. But folks who have studied the brain and observed the mind tell us that many of the thoughts we think are not necessarily true, and not necessarily useful or even important for us to think about.

However, that doesn't stop us from getting hooked into some very unhelpful patterns of thinking. We can easily get in the habit of, say, thinking about hypothetical worst-case scenarios of how our infidelity situation might unfold, and we can convince ourselves that doing this is really important and really productive.

It's useful to recognize that there may be both biological and social reasons why we're likely to do this. Our brains, as biological organs, evolved to help keep us safe from danger by identifying threats, and helping us figure out what to do about them. Even if we aren't "hard-wired" to worry, or destined to worry, we certainly have the biological capacity to worry. Our brains have the capacity to think scary thoughts and put them on auto-repeat. And in addition to this capacity, society provides plenty of messages that tell us that there are things we should worry about, and that there is value in worrying. So often we get the message that if we aren't concerned about something – or downright terrified of something – we're doing something wrong. We're being irresponsible, or worse.

So we can all be forgiven for getting into the habit of thinking about the most catastrophic scenarios that could arise out of our infidelity situation – or any other situation in our life – and attempting to figure out how we would handle such hypothetical eventualities.

But here are the questions I want to ask you today. Is it helping you to worry about whatever you've been worrying about? Is running through

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

worst-case scenarios over and over again doing anything useful for you? And if you think doing these things has been helping you, can you identify how, SPECIFICALLY they have been helping you?

I'm willing to bet that worrying and engaging in catastrophic thinking has not served any truly useful purpose.

Here's a really fucked up thing to be aware of: If we're in the habit of worrying, or thinking about "problems" in unproductive ways, our minds will find comfort in this mode of thinking. If we're used to worrying, if it's familiar to us, it may feel "good," in a sense, even if it doesn't really feel all that good. Familiar discomfort can be really comfortable in its own way.

And so we find ourselves in this weird catch-22: on the one hand, worrying doesn't HELP us. In fact, it may have some consequences for us that we really don't like. But on the other hand, we may not know how to stop worrying, and it may really seem like the world will fall apart if we dare to even try to not worry about something. Or everything. Crazy, right? I know.

We may truly believe that worrying or ruminating is helpful or necessary, even if we can't identify any actual benefits we're getting from doing a lot of it. And I want to make it really clear that intentional, deliberate, solution-focused problem solving IS important. It's important to allow ourselves to acknowledge things that we think are problems, decide if they are truly problems or not, and decide how we're going to deal with them.

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

I'm not suggesting that you need to convince yourself that the things you're worried about aren't important. The point is NOT that you need to talk yourself out of your concerns, or attempt to ignore them.

Rather, the point is that we can learn how to engage with our concerns, or our problems, or supposed problems, in a deliberate, intentional way.

What we often do, when we think we have a big, complicated, difficult situation on our hands, is freak out, effectively. We do things like tell ourselves that our situation is complicated, and overwhelming, and difficult. And if we start to tell ourselves that, we may believe it. And this gets in the way of actually addressing our situation, systematically and deliberately, one step at a time. Instead, we may attempt to boil the ocean in a teacup, and when that doesn't work, we take it as proof that our situation is even more difficult and complicated than we originally thought it was, so we worry and freak some more.

One of the things that is incredibly beneficial to do when we're stuck in a cycle of unproductive worrying is this: deliberately decide to stop engaging with our worries.

Now, to reiterate, I'm not suggesting that you effectively brainwash yourself, or you try to convince yourself that something you're concerned about isn't actually a problem. There may be times when you DO change your mind, and decide that something that you thought was a problem isn't actually a problem. That's a Thing, for sure, but that isn't what I'm talking about right now. What I want to underscore right now is that you don't have to actively engage with everything you're worried about during every single waking minute. You can deliberately and intentionally set your worries down for a while.

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

And there is much to be gained from doing this. Most immediately, if we can take a break from catastrophic thinking, we can find relief, and feel better, and there is value in this! Also, when we find relief, when we occupy a less cluttered and distressed mental state, we're much more able to think about our situation in a way that is actually productive. As you may have heard me say before, when emotion is high, intelligence is low. We may think that worrying helps us solve problems, but the opposite is usually true.

So how do we take a break from worrying, when it seems like we literally cannot stop?

First, consider that it is possible for us to learn how to manage our minds, instead of letting them have their way with us. It takes effort and practice to do this, but deciding that it is possible to learn how to be in charge of our minds is an important first step.

Second, stop what you are doing and write down everything you are worrying about. Obviously, if you're listening to this while you're driving, you don't want to write and drive. Or at least I don't want you to write and drive. But in all seriousness, make time TODAY to write down what you are worrying about. Get those thoughts out of your mind and onto some external medium.

Third, once you've got all of your worries written down in front of you, ask yourself whether it's helping you in a clearly identifiable way to worry about each of the items on your list. Spoiler alert: it probably isn't. But I really want you to do this exercise anyway. If worrying about any of the items you have listed is truly helping you, by all means, keep worrying. But if

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

worrying about ANY of the items on your list is not helping you, proceed to step number four.

Step four is this: ask yourself if you would be willing to stop worrying about each worry on your list for the rest of this day. Now I'm dead serious about this, and I've phrased this instruction very deliberately. I'm not suggesting that you tell yourself to stop worrying, or tell yourself that you shouldn't be thinking about the things you're worrying about. I'm asking you to actually have a discussion about this with yourself, and to effectively have a conversation with your own mind. You can imagine yourself approaching your own mind as a partner, and saying, "Hey there. I've been observing what you've been doing, and it doesn't seem to be helping me very much, so I'd really like to see if you'd be willing to take a break." Here's the thing. Your mind may not want to take a break. Your mind may want to just keep worrying, because it thinks that worrying is helpful, and it's gotten very good at doing this particular job, and it likes to have a job and be good at it.

But you have just begun to assume a new relationship with your mind. You have just appointed yourself manager of your mind, instead of employee of your mind. Your mind may not be fully on board with this change, and in fact, it may not even be aware of this change, so it may not instantly cooperate. But you can be resolute in occupying your new role. Your mind is allowed to want to worry, but that doesn't mean you have to just let it.

So, here's the thing. Managing our minds requires us to be firm AND gentle managers. If you ask your mind, "Hey, can we stop worrying about this particular thing, just for the rest of the day?" and your mind puts up a big fight, you may not be able to force it to do your bidding. You may want to offer a bargain – you could say to your mind, "Hey, if we don't worry about this today, we can always worry about it again tomorrow if we want to, how does that sound?" That may help you – and your mind – loosen

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

the grip on the need to worry. We can't bully ourselves out of worrying, or bully ourselves out of any particular thought pattern, but we can gently and firmly guide ourselves into new ways of thinking.

Step five: if your mind says yes, we agree to stop worrying about this particular thing for the rest of the day, your next opportunity is to put that plan into action. And here's the thing: even if we decide we're going to stop worrying about something, we may worry about it anyway! If our mind is in the habit of ruminating on something a lot, we may just go there automatically. And this is not a problem.

You don't have to banish thoughts of worry the second they arise, or try to prevent them from arising at all. What you want to start to practice is not getting invested in the thoughts of worry when they come up. You practice not getting sucked into engaging with them. You practice not giving them your focus and your attention.

PRACTICE is the operative word here. It takes willingness, and practice, and effort to create new mental habits. And that is not a problem, and it's totally worth the effort.

One of the metaphors I like to use when I talk to clients about managing their minds is this. If we're running a meeting at our workplace, and we're new to the job, and a lot of the people at the meeting are very opinionated, we have to be ready to keep our meeting agenda on track, without letting a bunch of other people derail us. We are the boss, after all. It is OUR meeting. Yes, other people get to be there, and they even get to speak up. But when people start voicing ideas that are totally off topic, or are completely unhelpful, we are totally within our rights to say, "Okay, thanks for that contribution, but we're not going to explore that any further right

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

now.” And we may have to keep saying that, over and over. Sometimes we hold meetings in which none of the attendees want to stay on task. Maybe they’re all preoccupied with something else. Maybe they’re in a bad mood. Maybe they’re tired. Maybe they’re hungover. Whatever! It doesn’t necessarily matter why our meeting attendees aren’t focused on the subject at hand. Our job is just to keep the meeting agenda on track.

And so it is with our thoughts. Our minds can offer us all kinds of thoughts, all day every day. But we don’t have to just stand back and get overwhelmed by the onslaught. We get to decide which thoughts we’re going to pay attention to. We get to decide which thoughts we are NOT going to pay attention to. Directing our attention in an intentional way may take practice, but it is POSSIBLE.

So if you decide that it is not helpful for you to worry about something today, and that worry comes up, you can simply notice that that thought entered your mind, and you can let it be there without giving it your full attention. Yes, the thought may nag at you a little bit. Or more than a little bit. Yes, it may generate some discomfort. But you don’t have to let it totally derail you.

Here's an example of what this can look like in practice. Sometimes folks who are engaging in some sort of infidelity behavior get OBSESSED with the possibility they might get caught cheating. They don’t want to get caught for all kinds of reasons, and they start to think about how bad it would be if they were to get caught, and all of this thinking creates a lot of intensely unpleasant emotions, and this starts to seem like evidence that they are indeed at risk of getting caught, so they start to panic and get really paranoid and the whole thing becomes rather miserable.

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

Here's the deal: if you're concerned about getting caught cheating, there might be things you want to do to prevent this from happening, or at least reduce the likelihood of this happening. Thinking pragmatically about how you can effectively address a particular problem or situation is problem-solving. Ruminating about the possibility that something might happen, and worrying about what it would be like if it did is not problem-solving.

Now when I talk to people about this, they sometimes say, "Yeah, but there's only so much I can do to avoid getting caught, so therefore I can't help but worry about the possibility of getting caught."

Here's the deal, people. Getting caught IS an occupational hazard of cheating. Beyond taking the actions you can to reduce your risk of getting caught, you may only have one other choice: stop cheating, or learn how to manage your worries. If the possibility of getting caught cheating is totally unappealing to you, you could decide to put an end to the cheating.

But some people don't want to do that, or do that right away, and I'm completely sympathetic to that. But here's the thing: you CAN manage your worries about getting caught if you want to. You are not powerless over your anxieties, or your catastrophic thinking, or your tendency to worry or ruminate.

And this is so, so, so important to be aware of because we usually need to reduce our worrying in order to resolve an infidelity situation in a way that's truly right for us. We may THINK that engaging in catastrophic thinking is going to help us figure out what to do, but it rarely works out this way. Now again, some people say to me, "Well, I'm doing something that I really don't feel good about, so how can I NOT worry and freak out?"

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

The short answer to that question is that even if you don't feel 100% amazing about what you're doing, you don't have to obsess about what you're doing wrong. You can hold yourself accountable for your behavior without freaking out about how bad it is, or how bad you are, or whatever your specific worries are. Some people are afraid that if they stop worrying, they'll let themselves off the hook, and then they won't make any changes, but relief from worrying is exactly what we need in order to make changes.

But you don't have to take my word for it. Try it and see.

So, to recap: Intentional, deliberate, solution-focused problem solving is one thing. Indulging in worrying is another.

Can you take a break from your catastrophic thinking?

What can you NOT worry about today?

You can always resume worrying tomorrow if you want to. Just see if you can give yourself a little respite today.

Remember: if worrying has become a habit for us, it will take time and effort to shift that habit. But this doesn't have to be daunting or onerous, even if it isn't instantaneous.

And of course, learning how to manage our minds more effectively, learning how to relate to our worries differently is a skill that applies to every area of our lives, not just our infidelity situations. But if you're not yet

Ep #120: Managing Your Worries

in the habit of relating to your mind as the master, rather than the servant, your infidelity situation is an EXCELLENT occasion to learn how to assume this role.

And of course, if you want to get serious about managing your mind, and sorting out your infidelity situation, I can help you do it. I know how excruciating it can be to get stuck in bottomless pits of worry, and endless loops of catastrophic thinking, and I can promise you that there is relief to be found from these kinds of thought patterns. And related to that, in addition to that, no matter how confounding your infidelity situation may seem, it is possible to sort it out, one step at a time, in way that is truly right for you. If you're ready to get started on that process, I can help you do it, and the first step is to schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com. You can also learn more about the coaching packages I offer and my current pricing on the services page of my website.

All right everyone! I wish you an excellent week. Bye for now.