

Anticipation

Imagine what it would be like if, periodically throughout the day at unpredictable intervals, someone stopped by to ask you questions like these:

- “What if you start sweating or blushing at the meeting?”
- “What if your heart gives out this afternoon at the mall?”
- “Wouldn’t it be awful if you faint while you’re making that toast for your daughter’s wedding next summer?”
- “Have you thought about the conference next year out on the coast? I don’t see how you can possibly get through that flight.”

Actually, if you have panic attacks and phobias, something very much like that *is* happening to you. It just isn’t somebody else doing it.

It’s you asking questions like these of yourself.

If somebody else came by to bombard you with negative statements like these, you might get upset at first. But you’d quickly get tired of it and tell the person to bug off or avoid conversation with him. If you couldn’t do that, you’d at least recognize that he was just trying to stir up trouble and take his heckling with a grain of salt.

When it’s you doing the heckling, it’s a little trickier.

Most people with panic and phobias think this way a lot. If you think you don’t, you could be an exception, but the more likely explanation is that you’re so used to this kind of self talk that you don’t pay it much conscious attention.

This negative anticipation can have a powerful influence on how you feel, even when you’re not consciously aware of it. The subliminal aspect of anticipation gives it power, because your body reacts to such thoughts even when you’re not paying conscious attention. When your body hears you thinking about dan-

ger, it starts preparing to protect you. That response makes you feel anxious and leaves you wondering “why” you feel that way at that moment.

Unfortunately, even when you consciously notice the anticipation, you’re not necessarily better off. That’s because you’re likely to get into an argument with your thoughts. The objective of any heckler is to disrupt your focus and get you into an argument.

You might argue for a variety of reasons. Maybe you believe the threats are realistic and worry about how to avert the catastrophes they predict. Maybe you recognize that the thoughts are exaggerated and unrealistic but still think it’s important to dispute them “just to be sure.” Maybe you’re afraid that worry is hazardous to your health, and might even kill you, so you argue in an effort to save your life. Maybe you even think that only crazy people have odd and unrealistic thoughts, so you struggle against these thoughts as if your sanity was at stake.

Arguing doesn’t make you any safer, but it does make you more anxious.

It may seem as if you’re damned if you do (notice the thoughts) and damned if you don’t, but it’s not that bad. You just need to find a third way—some middle ground that lets you hear the thoughts and make a reasonable interpretation of what they mean without becoming embroiled in an argument with them.

Here’s how you can create a third way for yourself that will take the sting out of anticipatory worry.

Understand the Nature of Anticipation

Most people don’t really stop to think about the process of anticipation and what it means. They just assume it’s an accurate prediction of some kind of trouble. Their unconscious attitude toward anticipatory anxiety is often something like, “If I’m this afraid now, how much worse will it be when I actually get there?”

They assume that when they arrive at the situation or activity they’re anticipating, they will feel even worse and have more trouble than when they were home (or wherever) anticipating the trouble. In other words, they assume that the anticipatory anxiety is just the start. The real trouble, they think, will happen when they get there.

Based on the circumstances that characterize your panic and phobias, think of a few specific instances in which you experienced a lot of anticipatory anxiety about an upcoming event. It might be a drive across a bridge, an elevator ride, a highway trip, a party, a crowded store, or any other situation that’s the focus of your anxiety. Identify two or three significant examples from your life, and then answer this question about each one.

What caused you the most trouble: the anticipation, or the actual results you experienced once you arrived at the event?

EVENTS	RESULTS
1. _____ _____	_____
2. _____ _____	_____
3. _____ _____	_____
4. _____ _____	_____

If you're like most people, you probably find that you had more discomfort from the anticipation than the actual situation. When you anticipate, you're free to imagine any kind of trouble, no matter how unrealistic. When you actually show up for the event, you're limited to reality, and reality is going to be a lot more "realistic" and easier to manage than your imagination. So your anticipation will naturally include a lot of fearful predictions that are unlikely to occur.

When you anticipate, it's easy to view yourself as the passive recipient of bad events. But when you actually show up, you have a role to play and options to choose, so you're not nearly the helpless target of fate that your anticipation describes. Getting engaged in the event in "real time" takes the anxiety level down.

If your review of your own history supports such a view—that your anticipation is usually worse than the actual outcome—then you have a powerful reminder to help you cope with the anticipation: "My anticipation is the high point of the anxiety. When I actually get there, my anxiety will go down, not up. I can look forward to that relief when I get there."

If your history shows you that your anticipation is usually worse than the actual outcome, it's proof that your anticipation is heckling, not helpful prediction. All that remains is to train yourself to treat it that way.

Step One: Get Better Radar

The first step is to improve your ability to notice your own heckling thoughts.

In days of old, before there was a national "do not call" list for telemarketers, most of us got a lot of phone calls we didn't want. We'd pick up the phone, and there would be a pause—an unusually long pause, not the kind of pause you'd get when a friend called. That was the first sign that it was a telemarketer. Their

automated systems dialed so many people at once that there wasn't always a salesperson ready to talk to you right away.

Then someone would come on the line with a terrific offer like, "Do you want to save a lot of money on long distance calls?" or "Would you like to get all your magazines for free?"

By that time, you probably realized it was a sales call and treated it that way. Maybe you just hung up, maybe you listened politely while you tried to get them off the phone, or maybe you borrowed Jerry Seinfeld's idea and asked for *their* home number.

But what if you didn't realize it was a sales call instead of a giveaway? Well, you might end up buying a lot of magazines you didn't want.

It's the same thing with anticipatory worry. These thoughts contain no information you can use. If you treat a telemarketer like someone actually calling to offer you a free present, no strings attached, you're going to buy a lot of magazines and Ginzu knives. If you treat your anticipatory worries like ordinary, reasonable thoughts, you're going to buy into a lot of panic attacks. In both cases, you need to recognize the message for what it really is and respond accordingly.

Fortunately, the great majority of these anticipatory thoughts announce their arrival with the words "what if."

Step Two: See the Thought for the Symptom It Is

The typical heckling thought is filled with words of catastrophe like heart attack, stroke, faint, and humiliation. If you focus on those words, you're going to get fooled into being very upset.

But look at how the thought starts: "What if. . . ?" You know what those words mean by now, don't you?

They mean "let's pretend something bad." The thoughts don't describe something that's actually happening. They're not there to inform you. They're there to egg you on, to get you agitated. They're going to heckle you until you can't think straight.

And why are you thinking this way? Only one reason. You're nervous. These thoughts are a symptom of nervousness.

They aren't important warnings. They aren't valuable messages that can help you live a happier and healthier life. They're merely symptoms of anxiety, and they mean the same thing as all other such symptoms: "I'm nervous." Nothing more.

Don't Play the Heckler's Game

The third step is to respond in a way that soothes you, rather than letting the heckling thoughts throw you off your stride.

RESPONSE METHOD 1: LET YOURSELF BE NERVOUS

Briefly check out the thought to see if there's any new or helpful information that you haven't heard a thousand times already, something that actually suggests a way you can live a safer and healthier life. If the thought contains a reasonable way to take better care of yourself, by all means, use it.

But the overwhelming majority of heckling thoughts don't offer anything of value, just an invitation to get worried and upset. You can dismiss such thoughts by simply saying, "That's okay, I'm just nervous. It's okay to be nervous."

Sometimes, that's all it takes. Simply notice the thought, identify it as useless worry, recognize it as part of the human condition, and let it go. But other times, you will find it hard to let go of the thought. Instead of getting into a struggle with it, use one of the following response methods.

RESPONSE METHOD 2: BYPASSING THE ARGUMENT

Have you ever had the experience of dealing with a person who just likes to argue—a Democrat, if you're a Republican; a National League Fan, if you're an American League fan; somebody who just enjoys arguing for its own sake?

What could you do if you were seated next to such a person at a wedding reception and you just didn't want to argue? You want to stay for the reception, so leaving is out, and all the seats are assigned and full, so moving is out. Nobody else wants to argue with this guy, so trading seats is out as well.

What could you do? You could try changing the subject, but he might just point out that you're changing the subject and keep bringing the conversation back to arguing. You could refuse to talk, but he might confront you on that and keep trying to resume the argument. You could try and ignore him, but just the effort of ignoring him would keep him in your attention. There are a lot of things you could try, but they all involve arguing—except one: humor him. Agree with everything he says. He'll soon get bored and look for someone else to argue with.

Your anticipatory thoughts are a lot like this guy's arguing. They're repetitions of ideas that have little basis in fact. They add no value to your life, and the more you argue with them, the more persistent they become. But if you humor them, they tend to fade away.

Anticipatory thoughts are just symptoms of anxiety. It's helpful to recognize them for what they are and respond in some useful way. But you don't have to honor them, or give them more seriousness and respect than they deserve. They're the mental equivalent of trash-talking. Arguing with them will tend to get you more agitated and upset, so don't argue with them. Humor them.

Think back on some of the anticipatory thoughts listed at the beginning of this chapter.

“What if I start sweating or blushing at the meeting? (Oh, yeah, I’m gonna sweat up a storm. Better bring some mops. The sweat’s gonna run through that conference room like a tidal pool at full moon. And blushing. They can turn off the lights, I’ll be producing enough candlepower to light the whole room in a nice red tint!)”

“What if my heart gives out this afternoon at the mall? (Why, I’ll be surprised if this old ticker takes me past breakfast!)”

“Wouldn’t it be awful if I fainted while making that toast for my daughter’s wedding next summer? (Faint? I’ll probably fart, too, and clear out the whole restaurant. When the groom’s family sees what a nut I am, they’ll be calling the Pope for an annulment.)”

Humoring is a great way to steer clear of becoming embroiled with these thoughts. Simply take the thought, agree with it, and add some more exaggerated details of your own.

It’s always good to try these methods first when you’re not anxious. If you wait until you’re anxious, it’ll seem too “experimental.” Try it now.

Write down two of your most frequent “what if” thoughts.

1. _____

2. _____

Now write humoring responses. Agree with the thought and add some exaggerated details of your own, just the way I did above.

1. _____

2. _____

RESPONSE METHOD 3: CALL THE QUESTION

“Call the question” is the name of a parliamentary procedure used in legislatures and other organizations to shut off debate and bring an issue to an immediate vote, so that the matter can be concluded.

Suppose you find yourself worrying about some upcoming event during which you think you might panic—perhaps driving across a bridge or meeting a friend to shop at a crowded mall—and you find that the two previous methods don’t seem to help much on this occasion. The event is several days away, and you’d rather not be plagued by worry until it arrives. You realize that the anticipation is usually the worst part for you, and your history shows that once you actually tackle such an event, it’s never as bad as you anticipated. But you’d like to worry less in the meantime, if that’s possible.

It is. Here’s how.

Immediately, or as soon as possible, go do exposure that is comparable to the task you are anticipating. For instance, if you’re worrying about a bridge, go drive across the bridge. If you can’t exactly duplicate what you’re anticipating, such as a party or other special event, do something as comparable as possible, something that involves the same fears and the same approximate level of fear.

“Why,” you might wonder, “would I ever do that?”

The reason is that the anticipation is worse than the reality. The sooner you get to the reality, the less anxiety you have to tolerate. Rather than live in dread of driving over the bridge for four days, take an extra drive on it today and get the relief that comes with completing the task that much sooner. While it may not entirely eliminate the worry you experience, it will lessen it. And, if you’re willing to do more repetition, say, driving the bridge each day, you’ll get all the more relief.

The three methods described above will enable you to dismiss worrisome “what if” thoughts more easily. But it will also be helpful to reduce the frequency with which you experience such thoughts. Here’s a way to do that.

Reduce Your Supply of Worry

Everybody wants to worry less. But when you tell yourself, “Stop worrying,” “Don’t think about it!,” or “Why are you worrying?” it just feeds into the worrying and makes it more persistent. Here’s a method you can use to gradually reduce the amount of repetitive worry in your life.

First, let me clarify what I mean by worry. I don’t mean planning, problem-solving, or any kind of thinking that produces a desired result or plan. When I say worry, I mean the unproductive and unpleasant repetition of “what if” concerns that never reach a conclusion or result in a plan. It’s the kind of worry that might

nag you for an hour, yet if you wrote it down on paper, it would boil down to one or two sentences, constantly repeated.

Here's what you do. Schedule two worry periods each day, ten minutes apiece. Write them in your day planner. Select two times when you can have some privacy. Avoid scheduling them first thing in the morning, last thing at night, or right after meals. During these worry periods, don't engage in any other activity like driving, showering, eating, cleaning, listening to the radio, riding on a train, etc. Instead, devote your full attention and energy to worrying and nothing else.

When it's time for a worry period, spend the full ten minutes worrying about the same things you usually worry about. You might want to make a list ahead of time, so you don't overlook any. During your worry period, indulge yourself in pure worry. Don't try to solve or minimize problems, reassure or relax yourself, or take any other positive steps with respect to the things you're worrying about. Just worry, which for most people means repeatedly reciting lots of "what if" questions about unpleasant possibilities.

Do your worrying out loud, in front of a full-length mirror.

No, that wasn't a typo. The point of worrying in this way is to help desensitize you to this worry as efficiently as possible. Most worry occurs when we're busy with something else, something that doesn't really take up our full attention. We might worry while driving, showering, doing homework, or watching a dull TV show. We never really get to give the worry our full attention. Because of this, and because we keep the worrying "in our heads," it's easy for it to continue endlessly.

When you say the worries out loud, you also hear them. And when you worry in front of a mirror, you also see yourself worrying. You're no longer just worrying in the back of your mind. Hearing and watching yourself, it's no longer subliminal. Most people find that it enables them to finish up their worrying in much less time than usual.

The main benefit comes during the rest of the day, outside your worry periods. When you find yourself worrying at other times, you will probably find it relatively easy to postpone the worries until your next worry period. You have a choice:

- a) take ten minutes now to worry very deliberately about this issue, or
- b) postpone it to your next worry period.

Postponing can be powerful, but only if you actually follow up and do the worry periods as prescribed. If you try to postpone worries, knowing that you won't actually do the worry period when the time arrives, you'll probably find that the postponing doesn't work for you. So don't try to fool yourself.

