

“Help! I can't stop worrying”

Our experts reveal the touchstones that can free you from what meditators call ‘the monkey mind’ so you can quiet the what-ifs and look ahead with hope

Focus on now Stop racing thoughts

The “monkey mind” is a metaphor for the primitive part of our brain, where racing thoughts come from, says psychotherapist Jennifer Shannon. Put the brakes on them by telling yourself, *I can influence but not control outcomes*, she advises. For example, instead of saying, *I'm afraid of getting sick*, remind yourself that you *can* take reasonable precautions and jot down what you're doing, from using hand sanitizer to wearing a mask. “The monkey mind is all reflex—that's why replacing it with *conscious* steps is so calming.”

Send ‘scary’ packing

To soothe your mind *and* body, picture scary thoughts, such as health and finance fears, as red trains leaving the station, and joyful thoughts, like FaceTiming your niece, as sky-blue trains



arriving, says psychologist Jill P. Weber, Ph.D. Inhale as you bring blue thoughts into your “station,” and exhale as red ones depart. “This helps you observe worries, not *become* them, so you can let them go and hold on to joyful thoughts.”

Shift into creativity

Worry causes tunnel vision, making creativity or “expansive thinking” its natural antidote, says Shannon, revealing that when her clients solve problems by thinking outside the box, she urges them to put a jelly bean in a “flexibility jar”—watching it fill reminds them how resourceful they can be. For example, when a client couldn't get flour for cookies she wanted to make, the loss of control she felt dialed up her anxiety. But when she stopped to think of alternatives *without* flour, she came up with Rice Krispies Treats—and “won” a jelly bean. “Using creativity to solve even small problems moves us out of a scarcity mindset into one of resilience.”



Rest in the now Move into acceptance

Acknowledging things as they are is key to finding solace, says Weber. “In one experiment, people were asked to write while blindfolded—those who complained experienced much more stress than those who accepted it and tried their best.” While the coronavirus crisis has put a much more challenging “blindfold” on all of us, the takeaway is similar: “When we resist, our brain is hyper vigilant—but just telling yourself, *I know we have to wear masks for now* or *I know we have to stay home for now*, gets you out of a reactive state, letting you relax.”

Open to hope

We're all experiencing loss right now, even for the little things, notes Shannon. “I can't go to

the beach, for instance, and that's something I love,” she says. “But I can look at the oak tree in my yard and appreciate its beauty—it takes a moment, but we can turn the loss of what was into gratitude for what is.”

Take comfort in this truth

In order to find lasting peace of mind during this or any crisis, ask yourself *what's true?* urges counselor Nancy Kane. “The truth is, no matter what you're worried about, you're okay in this moment.” Another vital truth? Surrendering to the fact that you are loved by a higher power can help you find the confidence that'll quiet worries. “Instead of being parked in the past or stuck in anxiety about the future, you'll be able to stay in the present, knowing you are valued and understood.”

Our expert panel



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