

SIMPLE  
STEPS TO  
OVERCOME  
ANXIETY &  
WORRYING



*by Dr. Sarah Allen*

Simple Steps To  
Overcome Anxiety  
& Worrying



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## Simple Steps To Stop Anxiety & Worrying

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Thank you for downloading my booklet. If you have got this far you are probably worrying about something. Have you always been a worrier or are you anxious about a specific thing? Either way, it is time to start doing something about it and change the way you are feeling. I am here to help.

When you feel overwhelmed, stressed and worried, life's challenges, big or small, are a lot harder to manage. When clients first come in to see me, the main concerns that come up again and again are:

1. What should I do when I feel really anxious about something?
2. How can I feel less stressed in my everyday life?
3. What lifestyle changes can help improve how I feel?
4. How can I stop my mind from going over and over something that has happened in the past?
5. How can I stop worrying about everything: my children, partner, friends, work, my "to do" list....

In this booklet I have highlighted areas of your life where you can make small changes, which added together result in big changes in your mood. You won't be able to do all these things I suggest in this booklet at once, but adding one or two small changes a day to your routine can really help to reduce worry and make life more enjoyable.





# Simple Steps To Stop Anxiety & Worrying

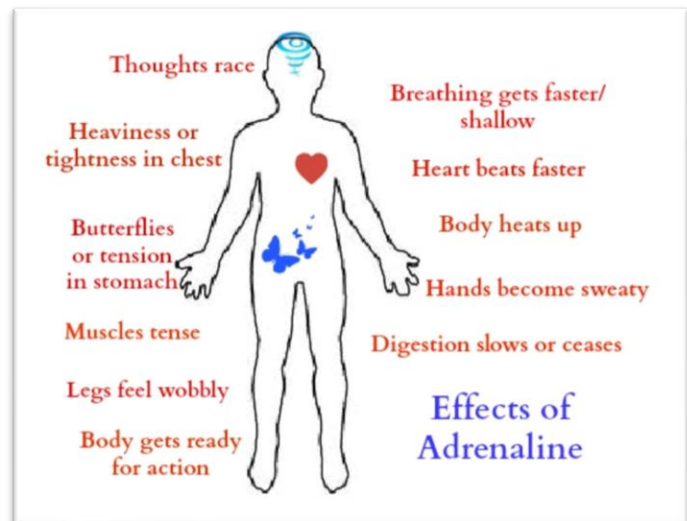
## Step 1 – Just Breathe

In small doses, stress can actually be useful, as it helps you to stay focused, alert and increases energy. But when stress becomes chronic, it can damage your health, your mood, your relationships, and your overall quality of life. Stress is sneaky! It can easily creep up on you so that being frazzled and overwhelmed starts to feel normal. You may not even recognize how much it is affecting you, so it is really important to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress and then take steps to stop feeling so overwhelmed.

### **The Fight or Flight Response:**

When we worry or become anxious, our sympathetic nervous system is triggered. You have probably heard of the Fight or Flight response. This is where adrenaline floods through our body to gear us up to either run away or fight the object causing us to be scared. No one feels all of the physical effects shown below, but we tend to experience the same few ones such as:

- An increase in heart rate
- Your breathing speeds up, you may feel breathless, a choking feeling or heaviness in your chest
- Muscles feel tense, achy or shaky
- You feel hot and maybe sweaty
- You become lightheaded
- Your vision may become blurred
- Butterflies or cramps in your stomach or an urge to use the restroom
- Your thoughts race so you can't think straight





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Originally our bodies were flooded with adrenaline to enable us to fight or run away when faced with danger. We don't usually have to physically fight people anymore or run from danger (not many bears around here!) so we now find that this physical response is activated in situations where it isn't appropriate, such as being stuck in traffic jams or during a stressful day at work. The physical sensations it generates leave us agitated, anxious or angry because we are not physically releasing it.

### **The Relaxation Response:**

The physical responses to adrenaline do eventually go down by themselves but experiencing this anxiousness and agitated state feels unpleasant so the way to counteract these feelings **quickly** is to engage our parasympathetic nervous system by deep breathing.

**Basically, deep breathing and adrenaline can't co-exist in the same body.**

Deep breathing triggers the stimulation of the Vagus nerve—a nerve running from the base of the brain to the abdomen, that emits a useful neurotransmitter (acetylcholine) that dampens our nervous system, lowering heart rate, relaxes muscles and most importantly, stops your thoughts from racing so you can think straight. In effect, the relaxation response is the anti-fight or flight response!



### **So How Do We Get This Relaxation Response?**

The relaxation response is activated by doing paced breathing which involves taking smooth, slow, and regular breaths. Sitting upright is usually better than lying down or slouching, because it can increase the capacity of your lungs to fill with air. It is best to 'take the weight' off your shoulders by supporting your arms on the side-arms of a chair, or on your lap. Print out the next page and keep it handy.





# Simple Steps To Stop Anxiety & Worrying

## How To Do Paced Breathing:

1. Take a slow breath in through the nose, breathing into your lower belly so you feel it inflate like a balloon (for the count of 4)
2. Hold your breath for 1 or 2 seconds
3. Exhale slowly through the mouth so that you are pushing out the air in the “balloon” and you feel your belly suck in (for the count of 5)
4. Make sure the exhale breath is one or two counts longer than the inhale breath as this activates a greater relaxation response.
5. Wait a few seconds before taking another breath

**About 6-8 breathing cycles per minute is often helpful to decrease anxiety, but find your own comfortable breathing rhythm.**

A lot of my clients have reported that they find this technique works even better if you increase the number of breaths each time:

**First breath** – inhale for the count of 4, exhale for the count of 5

**Second breath** – inhale for the count of 5, exhale for the count of 6

**Third breath** – inhale for the count of 6, exhale for the count of 7

**Start from the count of 4 again and repeat the cycle.**

### Practice, Practice, Practice:

You do not need to be feeling anxious to practice paced breathing – in fact, at first you should practice while feeling relatively calm. You'll gradually master this skill and feel the benefits!

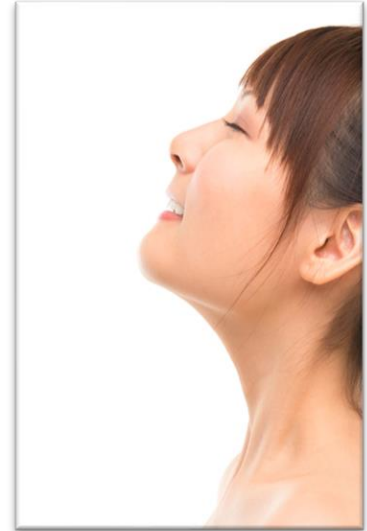


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Use this technique next time you feel really anxious about something. It is even effective if you are experiencing a panic attack.

### Summary:

1. We experience a **trigger thought** e.g. – “*Something bad is going to happen*”, “*I’m not going to be able to cope*”.
2. We then have a body reaction due to the **fight or flight response**.
3. **Do paced breathing** to activate the relaxation response.
4. **Say to yourself** – “I can cope with these feelings, I’ve got through it before. This will pass”.



The purpose of calm breathing is not to avoid anxiety at all costs, but just to take the edge off or help you “ride out” the feelings. That way, when you feel calmer, you can use the strategies we talk about later to challenge the thoughts and things you do or don’t do that are unhelpful to you.

If you would like to read about more breathing techniques just click on the image below or visit <https://drsarahallen.com/deep-breathing-helps-anxiety>.







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Paced breathing can really help when your thoughts are racing from adrenaline. Another useful technique I teach my clients to utilize when they feel anxious is called Grounding. Grounding occurs when you focus on what is happening to you physically, either in your body or in your surroundings, instead of being trapped by the thoughts in your head that are causing you to feel anxious. By stopping the adrenaline, you calm down your racing thoughts, which you must do before you can start thinking about things in a more helpful way. We will discuss this more in the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) section.

Grounding helps you stay in the present moment, instead of ruminating over past events in your mind, or worrying about things that may happen in the future.

I have written a blog post that details 7 different grounding techniques, and you can read it below by clicking the image or <https://drsarahallen.com/7-ways-to-calm>. On the next page I have included the most popular grounding technique, which is called the **5-4-3-2-1 technique** because it gets you to use all your five senses to help you to get back to the present moment.





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Start by sitting comfortably, now close your eyes and taking a couple of deep breathes. In through your nose (to the count to 3), out through your mouth (to the count of 3).

Now open your eyes and look around you. Name out loud:

5 – things you can see (you can look within the room and out of the window)

4 – things you can feel (the silkiness of your skin, the texture of the material on your chair, what does your hair feel like? What is in front of you that you can touch? A table perhaps?)

3 – things you can hear (traffic noise or birds outside, when you are quiet and actually listening, things in your room constantly make a noise but typically we don't hear them).

2 – things you can smell (hopefully nothing awful!)

1 – thing you can taste (it might be a good idea to keep a piece of chocolate handy in case you are doing this grounding exercise! You can always leave your chair for this one and when you taste whatever it is that you have chosen, take a small bite and let it swill around your mouth for a couple of seconds, really savoring the flavor).

Take a deep breath to end.



# Simple Steps To Stop Anxiety & Worrying

## Step 2 – Reduce Everyday Stress

Sometimes life is more stressful than at other times, usually when you are juggling many things at once. I like to think of it as we have a bucket of stressors. Throw this stress in and we are fine, throw in a couple of more stressors and we are just about okay, but it is that last thing that comes along that makes your ‘stress bucket’ overflow and then everything gets completely overwhelming. We need to look at all the things you have in your ‘stress bucket’ and see what we can get rid of so the things we can’t change are more manageable.

The table below shows the many negative effects stress can have on your mind and body.

Effects of Stress	
Brain Effects	Mood Effects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memory problems</li> <li>• Inability to concentrate</li> <li>• Poor judgment</li> <li>• Seeing the negative rather than positive</li> <li>• Constant worrying</li> <li>• Anxious or racing thoughts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moodiness</li> <li>• Irritability or short fuse</li> <li>• Agitation, inability to relax</li> <li>• Feeling overwhelmed</li> <li>• Depression or general unhappiness</li> <li>• Sense of loneliness and isolation</li> </ul>
Physical Effects	Behavioral Effects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aches and pains</li> <li>• Frequent illnesses</li> <li>• Diarrhea or constipation</li> <li>• Nausea, dizziness</li> <li>• Chest pain, racing heartbeat</li> <li>• Loss of sex drive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes in eating habit (more or less)</li> <li>• Changes in sleep habits (too much or too little)</li> <li>• Isolating yourself from others</li> <li>• Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities</li> <li>• Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)</li> <li>• Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to relax</li> </ul>



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The easiest and most enjoyable way to reduce stress is to increase the amount of time you spend doing positive activities. You may have found that feeling sad or worried has sapped all your energy and it is hard to get motivated to get going with anything apart from the things that must be done. One of the most important ways to improve your mood is to take the view that life isn't something to just get through, it is something to enjoy!



Here's an important question. When was the last time you actually asked yourself – “What is it that I want?” We often get in to the habit of looking after others' needs, especially your children and partner, and forget that sometimes you must make yourself a priority too. I am not talking about being selfish, just recognizing that you deserve the kindness you show to others to be directed at you too. Start simple – “What do I want for dinner?” not “I'll make what everyone else will eat”. Include your needs in there sometimes too.

This includes taking time for your own interests. We often get so busy that we don't make time for fun in our lives. We are so busy striving to “get everything done” – working, running around after the children, keeping on top of laundry and the house – that we don't stop to have fun or to relax and just be still.

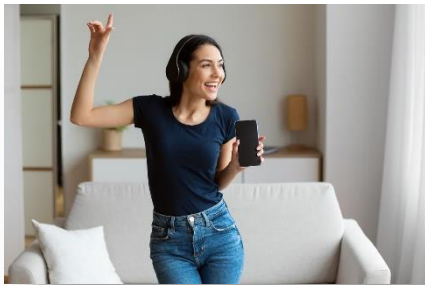




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One of the most important things we can do to reduce stress is to spend more time performing activities that uplift us. Make time for friends, time to relax, dance around the room singing to your favorite songs, get back to doing a hobby you enjoyed in the past, and most importantly, try something new. Novel activities challenge our brain to pay attention and combining attention and positive emotions helps to build positive neural pathways in our brains. It wakes us up so we are not going through life on auto-pilot!

Doing something, anything really, can feel overwhelming when you are already stressed. You may not think that you will enjoy doing an activity, but often, once you make yourself do something (and you



can always stop doing it at any time) you feel better. Each push you give yourself moves you further forward, increases your energy and makes the next thing you try easier. Doing nothing keeps you in that downward spiral of negative emotions.

You may feel like the stress in your life is out of your control, and it's true, sometimes you can't control situations, or the way other people act. So, what can you do to start improving the way you feel? Take charge of your body, your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, and the way you deal with problems. It seems hard right now, but you can take small steps and as you begin to feel better, the more progress you make.



**Doing nothing will only make problems worse!**



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### Step 3. Get More Sleep!

There is a huge connection between our physical health and our mental health and sleep is a very important component of both.

Getting more sleep sounds easy in theory, but so many people find it hard to achieve. The average amount of sleep needed by adults for their body and mind to be fully rested is around seven to eight hours a night. This of course can vary but you know you aren't getting enough when your mood is negatively affected.

Lack of sleep can stop you thinking clearly, wrecks productivity and can alter your mood significantly. According to the National Sleep Foundation (NSF), the "walking tired" become angry more easily, have problematic relationships and are less likely than those who sleep well to exercise, eat

healthfully, have sex and engage in fun leisure activities; all because they are too tired.



For some people, with work, errands and seeing to your family's needs, you have so much to do that you can only get them done by staying up late.

Maybe going to bed in the late hours is the only way to get some "me time".

However, staying up late is probably not working for you and improving your sleep is one of the best ways to improve the quality of your life. We need to work on being either more organized or less perfectionist about getting things done, knowing it's okay to ask and expect help, and knowing it is totally necessary to have "me time". But not at the expense of sleep!





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In the meantime, we need to work on setting up a good night-time routine. Our every day “to do list” is much less daunting when we are refreshed!

According to the National Sleep Foundation, “It’s not uncommon for people who don’t get enough sleep to be depressed or for people who are depressed to not sleep well enough.” This is very ‘chicken and the egg’. Who knows which comes first, but what we do know is that over time, impaired memory, mood and other functions become a chronic way of life. In the long term, this can affect your job or relationships.

So how can we improve sleep? Firstly, keep regular sleeping hours. **A bedtime ritual** teaches the brain to become familiar with sleep times and wake times and programs the brain and internal body clock to get used to a set routine. Most adults need between six and nine hours of sleep every night. By working out what time you need to wake up, you can work backwards and set a regular bedtime schedule.

Secondly, you can’t expect to “go, go, go”, then be able to fall straight to sleep. **Winding down** is a critical stage in preparing for bed.

### Here Are Some Ways To Relax

- ❖ Have a warm bath (not hot) as this will help your body reach a temperature that's ideal for rest.
- ❖ Writing “to do” lists for the next day can organize your thoughts and clear your mind of any worrying thoughts that pop into your head (more about that later...)
- ❖ Relaxation exercises, such as light yoga stretches, help to relax the muscles. Don't exercise vigorously though, as it will have the opposite effect.
- ❖ Guided meditations can help as they use a hypnotic voice to guide you through muscle relaxation and soothing music and sound effects to relax your brain.
- ❖ Watching TV or any computer or phone screen keeps the brain engaged and active so it is harder to fall asleep. It is better to read a book or listen to the radio as that relaxes the mind by distracting it from the present worries



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Perhaps the most important thing to remember in getting enough sleep is that **your needs are important** and putting your need for sleep above the demands of others is the kindest thing you can do for yourself and those who are important to you.

Insomnia can often be caused by lying awake worrying. This brings me to the next step I think it is important to work on in order to improve your mood.



### Step 4 – How Cognitive Therapy Helps To Decrease Worrying & Anxiety

The core principle of CBT is that our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are interconnected. CBT emphasizes the importance of identifying and challenging negative or distorted thoughts, as they often contribute to anxiety, worry and unhelpful behaviors. By addressing these thoughts, you can develop more positive and realistic thinking patterns, leading to improved mental well-being.



So why do we worry about things? Worries bother us. We can't sleep or concentrate because we have pessimistic thoughts going round and around in our head, but in a way, worries make sense as they pull us in to a false sense of feeling in control. We're doing something, even if it is just worrying.



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**You continue to worry because our mind thinks:**

- Maybe I'll find a solution.
- I don't want to overlook anything.
- If I keep thinking a little longer, maybe I'll figure it out.
- I don't want to be surprised. If I consider all the possible outcomes, I'll be more in control when something bad happens.

**We can have a hard time giving up on our worries because, in a sense, our worries have been working for us.**



So now I've pointed that out, let's just stop worrying then! Unfortunately, telling yourself to stop worrying doesn't work for long. You can distract yourself or suppress the thoughts, but they keep popping back up. Instead, I would like you to distinguish between whether your worry is solvable or not.





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Here are some good questions to ask yourself when you are worrying about something.

- Is the problem something you're currently facing? Is it an imaginary what-if or maybe it is something that is in the past and has already happened?
- If the problem is an imaginary what-if, how likely is it to happen? Is your concern realistic?
- If it is something you are currently facing, can you do something about the problem or prepare for it, or is it out of your control?

### Learning To Accept Difficult Feelings When Worry Is Not Solvable

If the problem is in the past, then you should decide whether to say something to the person involved or do nothing and accept what happened. If the worry isn't something you can solve, you should do nothing and practice acceptance. That doesn't mean it doesn't feel bad though. In such cases, it's important to tune in to your emotions. Your brain is so busy going over and over imaginary conversations with the person that hurt you that it gives a temporary sense of control and makes you feel like something is being done. But it's not really allowing you to get over it and it doesn't allow you time to feel.

The only way out of this is by embracing your feelings. Sometimes we just can't control events and we have to embrace uncertainty. Sometimes we are hurt and angry but there is nothing that can be done but feel our emotions. You are in control. You are deciding to feel your feelings so you can eventually let it go.



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### What to Do When the Worry Is Solvable

If the worry is solvable, we can use Active Worrying. This is where worrying serves a purpose. For example, we worry about a deadline at work and that motivates us to get the project done. It is really important to differentiate between a worry that can be solved and one that we can't do anything about.



Active worrying involves brainstorming ideas about all the possible solutions you can think of (try not to get hung up on finding a perfect solution though) and then make a plan that focuses on things you have the power to change.

Once you have a plan of action and start doing something about the problem, you'll feel much less worried. This technique is also very useful when you are stuck in an argument with someone. First, identify the problem you are arguing about. Then, brainstorm all the things you can possibly do about the problem and the likely outcomes. Finally, you can make a joint plan of action.

We talked earlier about how thoughts can keep us awake at night. Keep a pen and a pad of paper for worries that come to you at night. Night worries can go around and around in our head as it seems so important at the time to remember them. This can cause adrenaline to start rising in your body which, of course, keeps you awake and your thoughts racing more. Writing the worry down and then distracting yourself (read using a book light or do one of the relaxation techniques) calms you physically and mentally, allowing you to get to sleep.





# Simple Steps To Stop Anxiety & Worrying

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## Stop Worry by Questioning the Worried Thought!

We all worry sometimes, but if you constantly worry, chances are you look at the world in ways that make it seem more negative than it really is. For example, you may overestimate the possibility that things will turn out badly, jump immediately to worst-case scenarios or treat every negative thought as if it were fact.

*Here's an example: Kate was feeling overwhelmed at work. Her inbox was piling up and she had back-to-back meetings all day. She felt worried that she was so behind that her boss would be annoyed with her. She noticed her shoulders and neck felt tensed up and she identified her feeling as anxiety. When actively trying to identify her thoughts, she realized she was thinking "I won't ever be able to catch up" and "My boss will think I am bad at my job".*

These irrational, pessimistic attitudes are known as Unhelpful Negative Thoughts or Cognitive Distortions. The first step is noticing that you feel a negative emotion, worry, anger, sadness, etc. Next, ask yourself what your thought is.

## 10 Types of Unhelpful Negative Thoughts

When using CBT, several types of unhelpful negative thoughts are commonly identified. Recognizing these patterns can be instrumental in challenging and re-framing them. Let's explore ten of the most prevalent types of negative thoughts:

- 1. Overgeneralization:** Drawing broad conclusions based on isolated incidents. Example: "I made that mistake, I always mess things up."
- 2. Mental Filtering:** Focusing only on the negative aspects of a situation while ignoring any positive ones. Example: "I received several compliments on my presentation, but I can't stop thinking about the one critical comment."
- 3. Disqualifying the Positive:** Discounting positive experiences or accomplishments as insignificant. Example: "I only got the promotion because they felt sorry for me."





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- 4. Jumping to Conclusions:** Making negative assumptions about situations or others without evidence. Example: “She didn’t respond to my text; she must be mad at me.” This type of thought can also be called **Mind Reading** where you believe that you know what others are thinking or feeling without evidence. Example: “My boss didn’t smile at me today; she must be disappointed in my performance.”
- 5. Catastrophizing:** Magnifying the importance or impact of a situation, assuming the worst possible outcome. Example: “If I don’t get this job, my career is ruined forever.”
- 6. Personalization:** Assuming excessive responsibility for events or situations that are beyond personal control. Example: “My friend canceled our plans; it must be because I did something wrong.”
- 7. Should Statements:** Imposing rigid expectations on oneself or others. Example: “I should always be able to handle everything perfectly.”
- 8. Emotional Reasoning:** Believing that emotions reflect the objective reality of a situation. Example: “I feel anxious, so something terrible must be about to happen.”
- 9. Labeling:** Assigning global, negative labels to oneself or others based on specific behavior. Example: “I didn’t get hired after one job interview; I’m such a failure.”
- 10. All-or-Nothing Thinking:** Seeing things in very black-and-white terms, without considering that there are many different, middle ground approaches to look at something. Example: “If I don’t get an A on this test, I am a complete failure.” This also tends to be perfectionist thinking.

### These are good questions to ask yourself to stop the worry:

- What’s the evidence that the thought is true? That it’s not true?
- Is there a more positive, realistic way of looking at the situation?
- What’s the probability that what I’m scared of will actually happen?
- If the probability is low, what are some more likely outcomes?
- Is the thought helpful? How will worrying about it help me and how will it hurt me?
- What would I say to a friend who had this worry?



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When Kate asked herself those questions, she realized that the probability that she would “never catch up” was low and that looking back over the past year she could see that there were periods when



workload was high and periods when workload was lower. Also, she did not have any evidence to support that her boss would think she was bad at her job. She had had a very positive review two weeks before and during a prior time when she had felt overwhelmed, her boss had helped her prioritize deadlines. She saw that the way she was thinking about things wasn't helpful. It was more helpful to reassure herself that she

would get things done eventually and to sit down and prioritize tasks. She also felt more in control when she looked at next week's calendar. She could see that there were blocks of time that were meeting-free, so she would be able to catch up then.

I have just shown you how challenging worries and negative thoughts is useful in reducing the way those types of thoughts make us feel bad about ourselves. This is part of the type of therapy I specialize in, and it is called Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) or Cognitive Therapy for short. It is a short-term "here and now" therapy that is a proven effective treatment for a wide range of problems including depression, anxiety, stress, eating /weight issues and relationship problems.



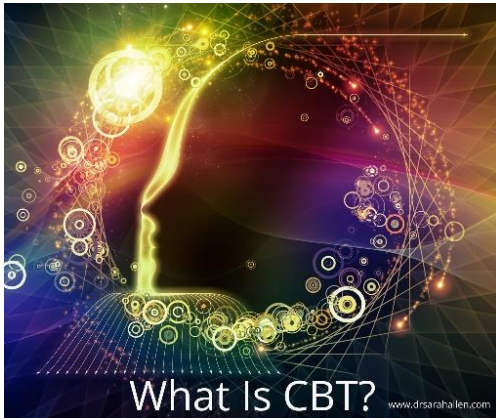
By learning to identify how your thoughts influence your mood and behavior, you then learn how to turn the negative thoughts around and feel better. I don't just mean let's turn all your negative thoughts into positive sunny ones. That wouldn't be realistic. Let's do a reality check instead. Ask yourself if your worries are in the present (and not the past or future) and whether the situation is in your control or not. Then by looking at all the evidence you can challenge those unhelpful thoughts and develop a more balanced perspective.



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Thank you for taking the time to read my booklet. I hope it has been helpful and will go on to be a source of useful tips and tools you can use in everyday life. Remember though that you can't change everything at once. It is best to try to change one or two things at a time and work on those, so they become useful new habits. Then go on to incorporate more changes, one at a time.



If you would like to read a more in-depth article about Cognitive Therapy (CBT), please click the image or visit <https://drsarahallen.com/what-is-cbt/>

Unfortunately, my professional license doesn't allow me to offer personalized advice by email which is why I like to write blog posts and booklets so I can share information with people who live too far to see me in person.

I really hope that the information I have shared in this booklet and on my many blog posts has been of help to you! You can read many more articles about anxiety and worrying on my blog [www.drSarahallen.com/blog](http://www.drSarahallen.com/blog) or join me on social media to read more psychologically based tips on how to lead the life you want to live.

*Sarah*



# Simple Steps To Stop Anxiety & Worrying

## About The Author



Dr. Sarah Allen is originally from England but she has been living and raising her family in the Chicago, IL area for over two decades.

She completed her postgraduate psychology doctorate at Southampton University, England, where she trained in a psychotherapy treatment called cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). CBT is short-term "here and now" therapy that is a proven effective treatment for a wide range of problems including anxiety, chronic pain, depression, eating /weight issues, relationship problems and

PTSD.

Her skills and many years of experience allow her to get to the root of problems quickly and show you practical ways to feel more in control of your life.

There are multiple ways we hold ourselves back from happiness. Sarah empowers her clients with the tools necessary to deal with the stress that life and relationships bring, both in the present and for when they show up again in the future.

For more information about Dr. Allen’s services please visit her website at <https://www.drSarahallen.com>

or contact her to discuss working together on 847 791-7722 or email [drsarahallen@drsarahallen.com](mailto:drsarahallen@drsarahallen.com) .

*Please note that Dr. Allen’s professional license only allows her to work with people who live in Illinois & Florida USA & the UK.*

