

Focused or Distracted?

Frances Schander, Associate Superintendent, Ontario Conference, Oshawa, ON

Which were you first: a teacher or a worrier? Have you ever noticed how your mind tends to gravitate toward worrisome thoughts, particularly in the middle of the night? *Whatever will I do with Jeremy, who's lagging behind in algebra? What will happen if I can't take a summer school class in order to maintain my current certification? What did Jennifer's mother mean the other day when she said, "Where were you during your teacher education programme?"*



Some time ago I wasn't sleeping very well. Pressures from a variety of directions made for sleepless nights. One morning, after a troubled sleep, I was reading a passage of scripture at the breakfast table. In prison the apostle Peter was waiting for the next day when he was to be brought before Herod. He was bound with two chains to two guards and, just to be doubly sure he didn't escape, Herod had posted additional sentries at the entrance. Although I had read this story many times before, the surprise came in Acts 12:6. The man who was facing almost certain death the next day was sleeping.

And I thought to myself: *Here you are. You have a few things that are preoccupying your mind, and you've let them consume you. You can think of little else. Your worry is robbing you of joy, of blessings, and a connectedness with both God and those around you.*

What is worry? What is anxiety? When does "concern" become worry? Psychologists tell us that worry is not all bad. The more you worry, the better you perform, but up to a point. Worry often helps us focus. If we can recognize worry for what it is, learn from it, and take action, then worry is worthwhile.

Worry itself derives from a feeling of vulnerability coupled with a feeling of powerlessness. It is fear that enshrouds our minds, often from what is imagined. That is when worry quickly becomes a negative. Too much worry can make us ill physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Taken to an extreme, chronic worry isolates us from family, friends, and God. It even prevents us from solving the problems that caused the anxiety in the first place.

Psychologist Wayne Dyer says that worry can be dealt with by mentally placing the concern into one of two categories: worry we can do something about and worry we can't do anything about. If what we are worrying about falls into the first category, then we need to take action to resolve the situation. Worry is often an excuse for inaction. If we can't do anything about the worry, we should allow God to handle the matter.

Can we change our worrying ways? According to psychiatrist Edward Hallowell, the answer is decidedly

"yes." Thankfully, we can change our thinking habits and reprogramme the human brain. The remedy may be simpler than you think. The following are suggestions:

1. Do something. One of the best cures for worry is action. If you have a lesson to prepare, do it. If you have had a falling out with someone, deal with it. Then give it to God. Avoid stewing over it.
2. Ask yourself: "Do I have a thinking problem?" Many of us live as though we have a different Saviour than Peter had. God wants us to be joyful, and sometimes we need to change the way we think. We must catch ourselves brooding and say sternly: I am remembering blessings today. I refuse to dwell on this problem because I have already given it to God. As the psalmist says, "This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad." (Psalm 118:24)
3. Learn to compartmentalize. Sometimes the problem which gnaws at the core of our inner self cannot be dealt with immediately. Sometimes it's important to say, "I am not going to think about that just now," and visualize slamming the door, as it were, on the concern. Practice makes this technique effective. Remember, "Cast all your cares upon Him, for He cares for you." (I Peter 5:7)

When we acknowledge that the same God who cares for Peter, still cares for us our lives become more livable, the joy returns, and we can serve Him more effectively. Believing that just takes a bit of practice.

Resources:

- Dyer, Wayne (2001). *Your erroneous zones*. Avon.
- Hallowell, Edward M. (1997). *Worry: Hope and help for a common condition*. Ballantine.