

Worry vs Problem-Solving

SAME CONCERNS, DIFFERENT RESPONSES

Worry and problem-solving can feel similar because they both involve thinking about challenges. But they are different processes. Worry keeps us stuck in a cycle of what-ifs, while problem-solving helps us take constructive action. Learning to tell the difference can reduce anxiety and help us respond more effectively.



Worry

A MENTAL CYCLE

Worry is repetitive, negative thinking about possible future problems. It feels urgent, but it doesn't lead to solutions.



FOCUS

What if? Imagining the worst-case scenario.



THOUGHT STYLE

Repetitive, hard to control, often catastrophic.



EMOTIONAL IMPACT

Increases anxiety, tension and fear.



OUTCOME

Keeps us stuck. Feels unproductive.



TIME ORIENTATION

Focused on an uncertain future.

COMMON THOUGHTS

"What if this goes wrong?" · "I can't stop thinking about it." ·
"What if I'm not prepared enough?"



Problem-Solving

A PRACTICAL PROCESS

Problem-solving is a structured way of thinking about a realistic issue, aimed at finding a helpful solution. It is calmer, more focused and action-oriented.



FOCUS

What can I do? Identifying what is within my control.



THOUGHT STYLE

Logical, realistic and solution-focused.



EMOTIONAL IMPACT

Builds confidence, reduces anxiety, creates a sense of control.



OUTCOME

Leads to options, plans and constructive action.



TIME ORIENTATION

Focused on the present and near future.

COMMON THOUGHTS

"What are my options?" · "What is the next best step?" ·
"What do I need to do now?"

Worry Is More Likely When

- The problem is uncertain or beyond your control
- You feel anxious or overwhelmed
- You keep going over the same thoughts
- It happens at night or when you're stressed

Problem-Solving Is More Helpful When

- The problem is within your control, at least partially
- You feel calm enough to think clearly
- You're ready to take action
- You want to move forward

PRACTICE THE SHIFT

1

NOTICE

Pause and ask: "Am I worrying or problem-solving right now?"

2

GROUND

Take a slow breath to create space and calm.

3

CHOOSE

If it's worry, let it go or schedule a worry time. If it's a solvable problem, write down your next step.

Not every thought needs to be solved. Sometimes the most helpful step is to notice, let go and come back to what you can do, right now.

SOURCES

Wells, A. (2009). *Metacognitive Therapy for Anxiety and Depression*. Guilford Press. · D'Zurilla, T. J. & Nezu, A. M. (2010). *Problem-Solving Therapy*.