

Worry Time Protocol

A structured, evidence-based technique for containing chronic worry into a fixed daily window instead of letting it run in the background all day.

The Research

Worry Time (also called scheduled worry or stimulus control for worry) was first tested by psychologist Thomas Borkovec at Penn State in the early 1980s. His research found that chronic worriers who postponed worry to a fixed daily slot reported significantly less

Why It Works

generalized anxiety and less time spent worrying overall, compared to those who tried to suppress worry entirely. Thought suppression research (Wegner, 1987) separately found that actively trying not to think about something tends to backfire, the "white bear" rebound effect. Scheduling worry works because it doesn't ask you to stop worrying. It asks you to delay it, which breaks the automatic link between a worry thought and immediate, prolonged rumination. Over several weeks of consistent practice, many people also notice the list of things they "needed" to worry about shrinks, a large share of intrusive worries lose urgency by the time the scheduled slot arrives.

The Protocol

01 Set a fixed daily worry window

Choose a consistent 15-20 minute slot, same time each day. Avoid scheduling it within 2 hours of bedtime, worry activates the nervous system and makes falling asleep harder.

02 Carry a worry notepad

When a worry thought shows up outside your window, write it down in one line and consciously set it aside: "I'll think about this at 6pm." Writing it down, not just deciding to postpone it, is the part that makes this work, it signals to your brain the thought has been captured, not dismissed.

03 Return to the task at hand

After noting the worry, deliberately redirect attention to whatever you were doing. This gets easier with repetition, the first week is the hardest.

04 During worry time, review the list

At your scheduled time, go through everything you noted. For each item, ask: is there an action I can take? If yes, define one small next step. If no, acknowledge it and let the window close on it anyway, rumination beyond the window doesn't add value.

05 End the window on time

Stop at 20 minutes even if you don't feel "finished." The boundary is the mechanism. An open-ended worry session defeats the purpose.

06 Track for 2-3 weeks before judging results

Borkovec's studies showed effects building over several weeks of consistent use, not immediately. Note roughly how much time you spend worrying outside the window each day, most people see this decline steadily.

A Note On Limits

This technique is well-supported for everyday chronic worry and generalized anxiety patterns. It is not a substitute for treatment of panic disorder, OCD, or trauma-related anxiety, where the mechanisms driving distress are different. If worry is severe, persistent, or interfering with daily functioning, working with a licensed therapist, ideally one using CBT, is the better first step.