

The Rampant Deluge of Worry That Is Now A Societal Norm



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — January 19, 2019



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Imagine a world where no matter where you turn, albeit your phone, the television, social media or a billboard, you are confronted with happy, healthy and even marginally optimistic images or messages? The notion is sadly so fantastic that it is unimaginable. More realistic is the last few hours I have spent attempting to watch a movie where I cannot escape my awareness fatigue from being tested. From ads for Peyronie's Disease to bone loss and drugs for autoimmune illnesses, social media posts on mammography to Lyme, Twitter alerts on pool, trampoline and play date safety, it is nearly impossible to avoid the noise of pathology. And, that doesn't even scratch the surface of my email inboxes, texts, voicemails or face-to-face human interactions.

Now, an all roses and lollipop world does not foster resilience or enhance gratitude and coping skills, but I am quite certain an even slightly more balanced one could provide such a therapeutic benefit. If only fear was not such a bestseller, then we would have a fighting chance.

There is a reason that it is a running joke that medical students, to some degree or another, go through a phase of thinking they have every disorder they study. Back in the day, I recall a colleague who was in residency conveying how whenever she left the hospital after being on call it would always surprise her everyone she encountered was not sick.

To go through the rigorous training in the medical realm and to practice each day, it should come as no surprise that your lens shifts its perspective. You see such extremes of suffering and witness the most intense of human experiences. That concept should resonate with people. But, to those not in the caring professions, what adverse impact and to what extent is our elaborately dis-eased ecosystem making us sicker?

Acute worry is vital to survival. It allows us to integrate our senses with our experiences out of a protective instinct to flee from danger. When it becomes chronic and excessive, the result is many deleterious effects on our health and well-being. We sustain high levels of adrenaline and cortisol. Over time, this weakens our immunity. We sleep poorly, which further contributes to mood and weight fluctuations.

Preoccupation with disease, whether you have one or want to avoid one, can hamper living when taken to an extreme. How much more extraordinary could we make our lives if we worried less about the “what ifs” and endless speculation and concentrated our minds on what actually is happening?

For, if I learned anything in my years of medical practice, it was the redundant revelation that we tend to worry most about the things that never happen. And, the things that actually do happen, most often are things we never even thought to worry about or consider.

As someone who genuinely appreciates the many messages out there on disease that help spread actionable awareness that truly saves lives, I also appreciate the value in fully living each day. Tomorrow is promised to no one. For those privileged enough to be healthy, we need to ask ourselves how we wish to spend our fleeting time, in sickness or in health? Keeping our focus on prevention is crucial and important, but when we cross over to all-consuming we are harming ourselves. Control is a false perception anyway, diseases follow their own timeline. Worrying for six hours or six weeks will not change this fact. And if they do occur, at least we are fortunate to live in an era where there is so much meaningful medical progress, advancement and an ability to be an active participant in your own care.

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