

Under pressure

Do you sit up all night fretting about the next day's meeting? Concerned you haven't written that will?

Don't pull your hair out just yet – **KIRSTIE McDERMOTT**

has calming advice for worrywarts.



Recently, over a glass of wine, a friend haltingly confessed that she hadn't been sleeping well. As I nodded along, all too familiar with this from my own experience, she explained that due to redundancies at work, there was now more on her plate than ever before. She'd drop off because she was so exhausted, only to come to at 4am with a list of the next day's tasks running through her

head. The net effect was she was rapidly changing from confident financial whizz into scared, shuffling zombie as she fought to break the cycle.

Afraid to raise the issue at work for fear of seeming weak – or worse, being replaced – her anxiety levels were ratcheting through the roof. Each day, she panicked and worried about all the

things that could possibly go wrong in her life, and there seemed to be no end in sight.

Job-related stress caused Aoife Murphy, a 30-year-old Dubliner, to leave her job at a media start-up last year. A bullying management structure triggered anxiety issues she's still battling. "There was this constant fear of being fired. Every day, you'd be told you were doing things wrong, that your job was on the line. I was a nervous wreck."

In the current economic climate, Murphy's tale is all too common. Her solution was to resign, but the anxiety lingers. "I find I second-guess myself now. It really destroyed my confidence," she says.

The Irish Mental Health Commission is well aware there's a worry problem, publishing a report in 2011 titled *The Human Cost – An overview of the*

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PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOPE BEAUTY

evidence on economic adversity and mental health and recommendations for action. In it, they noted an increase in scripts for antidepressant drugs. Prescriptions for Mirtazapine, used to treat anxiety and panic disorders, increased by 19 per cent in 2007 and 2008, the last years for which figures are available.

"I think it's safe to say that many people are struggling with an overload of stress," asserts Veronica Walsh, a low-intensity cognitive behaviour therapist (cbtandfeelinggood.com). But there's the day-to-day, ebb and flow sort of worry, and then there's the type of chronic anxiety that takes hold of your life, like the proverbial monkey on your back. "Everybody has situational anxieties when things are stressful, they can be low or moderate or severe, and some people have general anxiety that they live with all the time," she explains.

Some anxiety in our lives can be positive. It can motivate us to finish a challenging task, prepare well for a tough interview, or get us through a big event, like a public speaking engagement. Kathleen McGrath, a twentysomething blogger who has suffered from anxiety for several years, knows this all too well. "For those who aren't biologically prone to pathological anxiety, it helps you respond to situations. Your senses are more honed and focussed," she says, reasoning, "it's how people are able to lift cars off others in accidents, for example."

For most people, once the thing we've been stressing about is over, our state of worry reverts to calm, and we carry on as normal. But for those who can't shake off the fear, it's a different state of affairs. The chronic worrier, or the person with generalised anxiety disorder, exists in a permanent state of hyper-arousal, always living in the past or the future, constantly predicting doom or dwelling on things they can't change.

"If people feel upset a lot of the time, and they're using emotional reasoning – that is 'I feel bad, so it must be bad', then that determines their behaviours," says Walsh. "It makes life very hard for the sufferer,



Your worry profile
WHICH ONE ARE YOU?

THE 360° You worry about the lot: the cat, your pension, your significant other, your job, your parents, your friends, your leisure time. In fact, you fret about everything, and nothing.

MYSTIC MEG You can't live in the now because you're so busy predicting the future. You tell yourself, "If I do this, it will be terrible." You believe your fear of an event means the fear will come true.

NIETZSCHE Like the famous philosopher, you're haunted by the big, existentialist questions. What's the meaning of life, and why are we here? These mind-twisters mean it's really hard for you to sleep at night.

THE RUMINATOR You can't let go of the past, constantly worrying about things that happened years ago. Regret is huge as you beat yourself up over things you feel you coulda, shoulda, woulda handled better.

and when the cycle sets in, people quickly just accept that their interpretation of events and the world is rational and plausible, that they feel bad because it is bad, and they develop self-sabotaging behaviours, such as avoidant behaviour, and so on."

In addition, says McGrath, chronic anxiety has a physical component, and it's one that's often overlooked. "There is a big mind-body connection," she says. "I developed IBS as a result of my anxiety."

Walsh agrees. "Your response is not just 'emotions', it's very physical too. Your body primes itself and pumps itself to high alert for an event it thinks might be a bit

dangerous – in just the way it would if there was a real physical danger present, even though this danger is psychological."

So what can you do? The real sting in the tail for chronic anxiety sufferers is that it can take years to work out that worry is the issue, because it's just normal to feel that way. It took me until my mid-thirties to understand that anxiety was the root of my stress, and that something could be done about it.

A lot of Googling – McGrath's also a fan of this route – led me to cognitive behaviour therapy, or CBT, as a solution. "It's a very practical psycho-educational model that is proven to outperform meds," confirms Walsh. "It literally teaches people to understand and examine and restructure exaggerated thoughts and beliefs they have about themselves and the world and events. It's a science. It's beautiful and it works."

CBT, along with appropriate medication, can be a Godsend. But, cautions McGrath, if you don't have the funds for private therapy, you can be bang out of luck. "In this country, it's just not accessible. It's expensive; there aren't enough trained professionals. I've been on a two-year HSE waiting list, and no sign of a referral yet."

It's not all doom and gloom. Mindfulness, exercise and other lifestyle changes can have a positive effect on anxiety. "I find exercise helps, because when you exercise, you have to focus on the now, so you don't injure yourself," explains McGrath.

Veronica Walsh recommends a form of self-help called bibliotherapy. "In fact, for low to moderate conditions, people can use it to learn the theory and application [of CBT] themselves as self-help – it's very effective." With a wealth of literature online, it's something a worrier can get stuck into straightaway. Mindfulness, the therapeutic practice of focussing your awareness on what's happening right now, can also be useful, as can meditation, as a form of relaxation. If you're an iPhone user, then the App Store and iTunes U contain a wealth of content for both. And, says Walsh, "of course, sometimes meds are needed alongside the therapies. It's a real condition that requires a care plan and action – whatever works."

For me, a large part of my anxiety was stress-related. Letting some projects go, being kinder to myself by keeping a daily diary of good deeds, as well as several months of CBT sessions, helped put me back on the right track. I'll always worry – it's part of who I am – but now I have the tools for the future to know when enough is too much, and how to prevent it from spilling over and spoiling the good parts of life. ■

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