

don't worry, be healthy

How to make sure chronic fretting doesn't affect your well-being

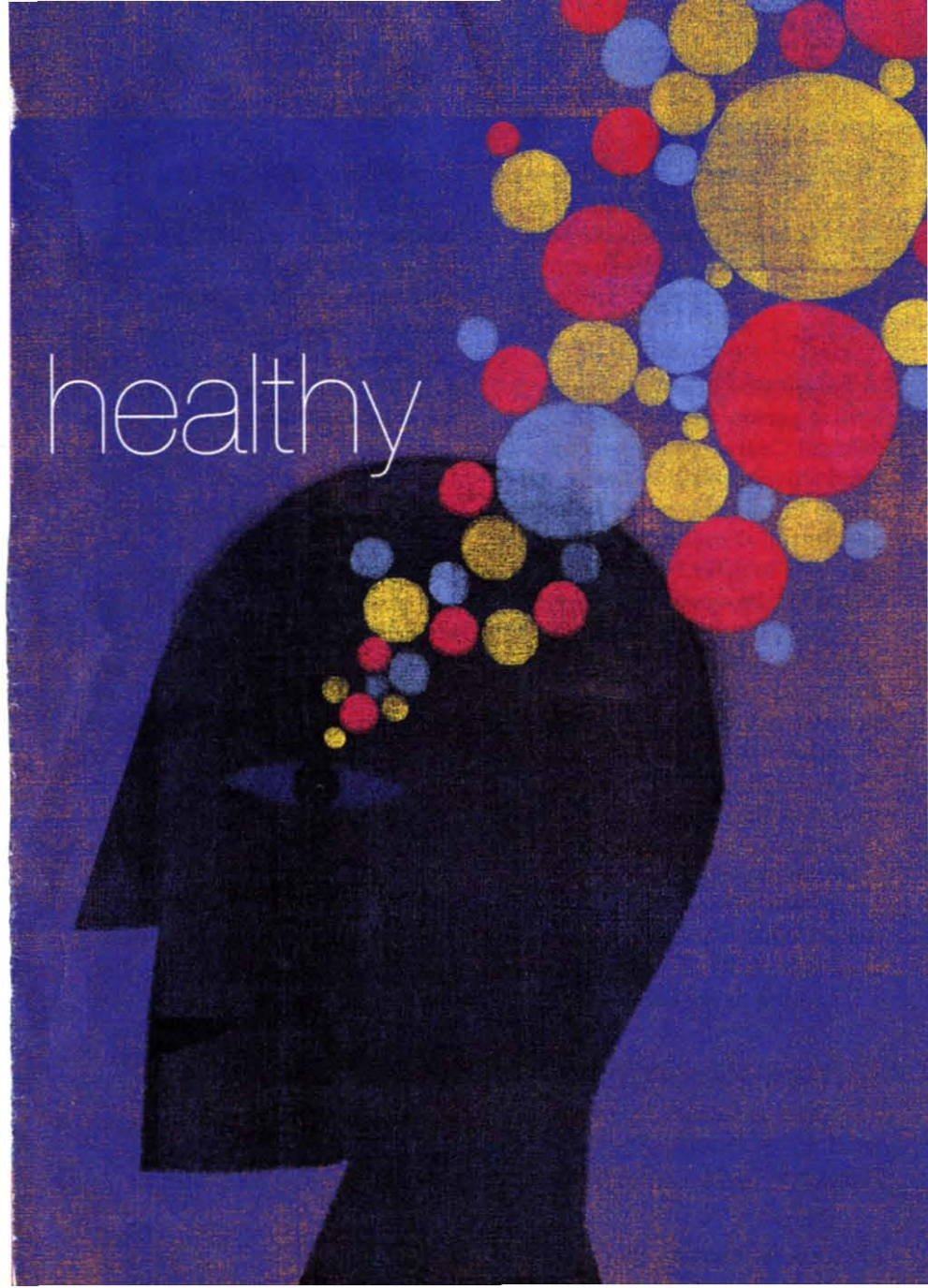
Worry can make you feel miserable—but did you know that it can also take a toll on your health?


Excessive concern or anxiety saps energy and hinders productivity. It also stimulates production of cortisol; this can lead to weight gain, depression and heart disease, all of which might make you worry even more. As tension mounts, you may find yourself turning to self-soothing habits—smoking, drinking, eating too much—and further compounding the damage that excess worry does to your health.

“Reducing worry, much like losing unnecessary weight, is a way you can have a healthier life,” says Robert L. Leahy, Ph.D., author of *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry From Stopping You*. “By reducing anxiety, you reduce physical tension and aches and pains, improve sleep and ease digestion.”

Regrettably, almost 40 percent of us worry every

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unpleasantly surprised sometimes than miserable all my life.”

Embrace Novelty

Worriers tend to avoid new things (public speaking, going to parties) because it makes them uncomfortable; they worry because they think it will help them avoid discomfort. But when you can do things that are uncomfortable, you automatically rely less on worry as a coping strategy. “A worrier thinks that worry will prevent something bad from happening,” says Leahy, “while a resilient person thinks, If something happens, I’ll handle it. It’s like learning a new language or dance or instrument. You do things that are initially uncomfortable in order to make progress.”

Be Realistically Positive

Worriers jump to conclusions about bad things happening, but research shows that 85 percent of the things people worry about have a positive outcome. “It’s a good idea to look at the evidence for and against your worry,” says Leahy, “and to find the positive side of a worrisome situation. For example, if you’re worried that you might lose your job, rather than thinking of being fired as a

catastrophe, think of it as a chance.” Banishing worries and becoming positive, Leahy says, is a process of “reframing change so you see it as something that offers opportunities.”

If you want to develop a more positive outlook, try writing down your worries and keeping track of the outcome. You’ll see how often things turn out positively. It can also help to schedule a worry time, say from 4:30 to 5:00 P.M. If you become worried about something at 10 A.M., write it down, then set it aside to worry about later. This way, you’ll confine your worries to one time of the day.

Worry Fugit

Know that emotions pass. “People who worry think negative emotions will last a really long time or overwhelm them,” says Leahy. “But any emotion, including anxiety, anger or sadness, is only temporary. It’s a key thing to realize this.”

Leahy suggests keeping a daily journal of both your emotions in general and how you feel when certain things happen: “People who keep a journal of disclosure actually feel like they’re coping better,” he says. “They feel less distressed and less anxious.” ■