

A LINE ON LIFE

11/8/89

Why Worry? *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Many of us spend a lot of time worrying or feeling guilty about things we have done – or things we have *not* done. However, guilt and worry are about the two most useless feelings we can have. Let me tell you why.

If you are worrying or feeling guilty about something – either you can do something about it or you cannot. If there is nothing you can do about it now, worry is absolutely useless. All it does is keep you from dealing with other problems that you are capable of solving. This makes you feel more helpless and out of control. On the other hand, if there is something you can do – quit your worrying and do what can be done to solve your problems.

It is useless to worry about something you cannot control.

Problem solving is often as much a matter of taking the right approach as it is of having intelligence, determination or strength. Problem-solving **strategies** are used by an army general, who works according to plans to overcome great odds. Though his armies were often outnumbered by as much as 5 to 1, Napoleon overcame brute force with carefully planned strategies. Can similar strategies be applied to our everyday situations?

Let's look at problems such as having only a week to prepare for three exams, supporting yourself through college, getting a date and being expected to be in two places at one time. Assume that you not only have one but *all* of these problems at the same time. (Things could be worse.) What strategies could you use?

First, start with the idea that you *can* solve your problems. The strategy of maintaining a **positive attitude** will help you persist in the face of setbacks – and there will be setbacks. If you believe you can handle your problems, you are off to a good start.

However, hope alone is not enough. The next strategy is to **analyze your problems** and **identify your priorities**. After all, why should you worry about money for college, if you are going to flunk out next week? To set priorities, it is useful to write your problems down with deadlines for solving them. Listing the problems I mentioned might look like this:

1. *What to do on Sunday, when both my parents and my friend are expecting me (3 days left).*
2. *Prepare for three exams (7 days left).*
3. *Get \$2,400. (You have enough money until the end of the term in 2 weeks, but you need money for next semester.)*
4. *Get a date. (There are 10 days until the dance.)*

Next comes the most important step – *concentrating as much energy as possible on your top priority before going on to the second*. This was Napoleon's strategy. By concentrating his resources at a single point, he achieved victory against much larger armies. The alternative – dividing your efforts evenly – tends to scatter your energy and make it less effective.

Suppose you decide to concentrate on the Sunday duplication of commitments. To solve this problem, you could use an **analogy**. Compare this problem to similar ones you have had in the past. Can you deal with this problem in a similar way? What alternatives did you consider then? Did you postpone one appointment? Did you combine both? Did you use another problem (like your need to study) as an excuse not to go to either?

After you have done *everything you can* to solve your top priority problem – solved or not – temporarily forget it and turn your complete attention to the second priority. To study for three exams in one week, it helps to use the strategy of **subgoals** – breaking the problem down into smaller, more manageable goals. For example, you might divide your task into three parts – what you need to do for each separate exam. In turn, each of these subjects can be divided into chapters or units to be studied. Next, you can create a schedule by assigning a deadline for each subgoal. (For example, On Friday, study one chapter in the first subject and one in the second. On Saturday, study two chapters in the third subject and so on.)

Creating a schedule frees you from worrying about *how* you are going to get the job done. You can concentrate your efforts on each day's assigned tasks – taking first things first – and modifying your schedule as necessary.

Doing well on your exams may help with the funding for the following semester. Parents are more willing to provide funds for college – if you are earning good grades. Even if your parents cannot cover all of your expenses, better grades increase the likelihood of getting some financial aid from your school. (However, don't worry about this over the weekend, when the financial aid office is closed.) Concentrate on your studies as the first step to getting good grades to achieve the goal of financial support. On Monday, make an appointment to see someone in the financial aids office about your problem.

Now let's talk about that date. Whenever possible, take actions that can solve more than one problem at a time. For your exams, it might be helpful to get a study group together. If you are interested in a classmate, be sure to include that person in the study group. A break in the study session could be a good time to ask about that date. (However, don't worry about asking for the date, when you are supposed to be studying.)

What if the desired person is not a classmate? I'll just let you worry about that. (Are you just going to sit there and worry – or are you going to do something to achieve your goal?)

* Adapted from Dennis Saccuzzo's *Psychology: From Research to Applications*, Allyn and Bacon, 1987, pages 271-272.