

# HOW TO HANDLE STICKY WORRY THOUGHTS...FOR KIDS

By David Russ, PhD

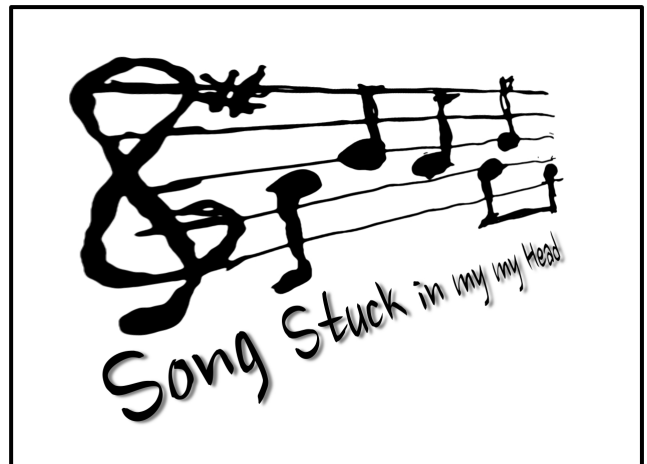
## PART 1: THE PROBLEM

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Do you ever get worried about something, and it just keeps going and going in your mind? There is a way to stop it. First, let's break this problem into some parts. First are **WORRY THOUGHTS**, next are **WORRY ACTIONS**, and last is the **STICKY TRICK**.

### WHAT ARE WORRY THOUGHTS?

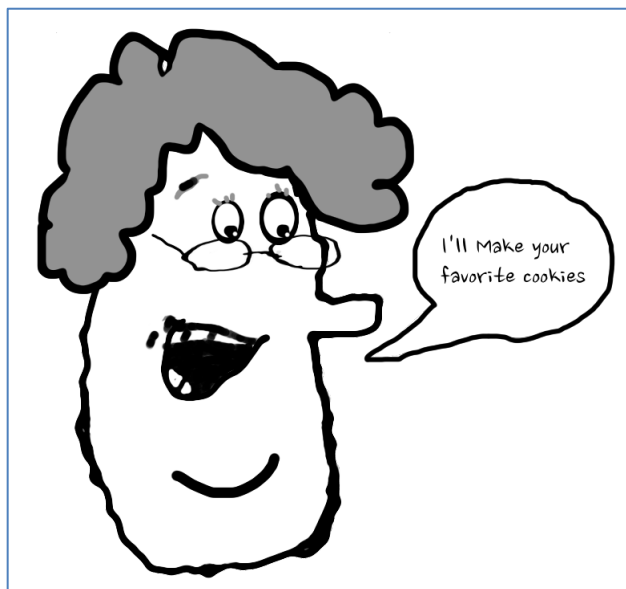
Sometimes, a worry or fear pops into your head and you just can't stop thinking about it. These thoughts 'intrude' even though you don't want them. They're like an annoying song stuck in your brain and won't stop. It's like the more you want it to go away, the more it digs in its heels. You didn't ask for them – they just push into your thinking and are



shocking and/or distressing. These worry thoughts can be called an 'OBSESSION' if it is a big enough problem.

## WHAT ARE WORRY ACTIONS?

A worry action is when you try to do something to make the worry go away like checking something repeatedly (example, taking your temperature), asking lots of questions (example, "Do you think I will get sick?"), or think so hard about it over and over just trying to fix it. That's called a **SAFETY BEHAVIOR**. The desire to feel safe can have so much force you may feel like you can't stop it. It is like a terrible itch, and you **MUST** scratch it. The urge feels like a powerful force. Sometimes it is also called a



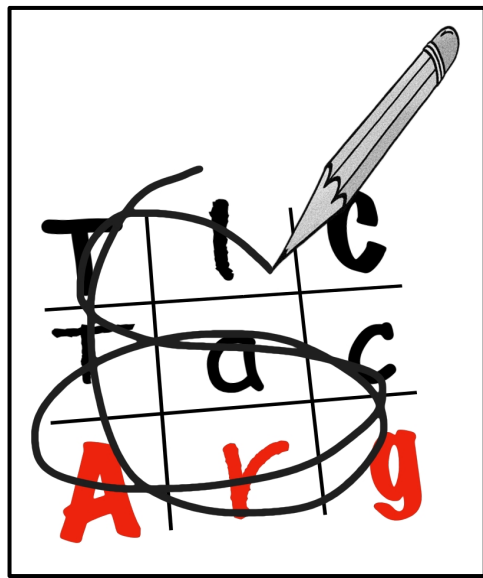
'**COMPULSION**' if it is a big problem.

For example, imagine you **REALLY** want to spend the night at your grandmother's house but the urge to feel safe just won't let you do it. Or you are soooo hungry, but you are afraid if you eat it will make you sick, so you don't eat. One part of you is fighting with another part of

you. It's your brain's way of trying to feel better, but sadly in this case, giving into it feeds the worry, making it stronger instead of weaker!

## THE STICKY TRICK

Have you ever played tic-tac-toe? The first time or two that you play someone might win. After that it is always a tie with no winner. Imagine



someone tries to talk you into playing. You know there is no way to win, and it would be a waste of time, so you say,

*"No thanks, I don't want to play."*

However, the person is extremely pushy and keeps trying to get you to play. It even starts to taunt you with things like, *"If you don't play something bad will happen,"* *"What kind of person wouldn't play?"*, or *"You don't care about me!"* Eventually the person will figure out some way to get to you and next thing you know you are making an X or O.

Worry thoughts are like that and will try to pull you into the game. By that I mean you will try to figure out what to do or have an argument in your mind about the problem. Your mind gets captivated by the worry! An argument might be like this:

**Worry:** *"If you don't turn off the light switch correctly the house might catch on fire!"*

**You:** *"I don't think it will cause a fire."*

**Worry:** *"How do you know? There is electricity running through the switch and electricity can cause a fire!"*

**You:** *"I don't want to have to keep flipping this switch. I have done it so many times already!"*

**Worry:** *"Oh... so you don't **care** if your house catches on fire? Only a terrible person wouldn't care if their house caught fire."*

Here is another example:

**Worry:** *"What is that strange feeling in your stomach?"*

**You:** *"I don't know. Maybe I am just full?"*

**Worry:** *"Or maybe it is the first sign you are going to get sick! You just ate breakfast. Is it food poisoning!?"*

**You:** *"I eat that for breakfast all the time and nothing happens."*

**Worry:** *"This could be the one time! You should have checked the food better! You are going to be sick. You're getting more anxious. That is a sign! You are in trouble now!"*

There are so many ways that worry can pull you into the whole argument like that. The more you think about it, the more worries pop up. Most worries go away after a bit. If it is sticky worry, then it has possibly been going on most every day for weeks, months, or years.

**Getting pulled into the 'game' is how thoughts get sticky.**

## PART 2: A NEW STRATEGY

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When anxiety and worry have become a big problem, you **MUST** change your strategy. You cannot sit down and play because you will never win. The solution to pushy thoughts is to **NOT** play. You need a new approach about how to respond to the pressure from the worry to keep thinking about it that will be 'sticky proof'. We can call this a 'non-participation' or 'I'm not playing' response.

Since you have been stressing for weeks, months or maybe years, I hope in some way you know that you need to do something different. Don't you think if it was going to work it would have by now? Think about trying this new approach.

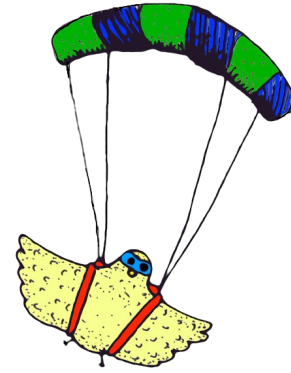
### WHAT IS A NON-PARTICIPATION RESPONSE?

A **Non-Participation Response** (let's use the letters **NPR** or call it '**NOPEr**') is a special way to talk back to your worry **without trying to solve it**. Here is the plan:

1. Do not keep playing. Just like tic-tac-toe, you are **NOT** going to win.
2. Be willing to have scary thoughts and strong bad feelings...and do **NOTHING** about them. It might seem like it will be absolute disaster at first. Imagine you are going to parachute out of a plane. You will

think of everything that might go wrong! It might feel like life or death. But you are not actually in that situation, it is just your imagination thinking of what might happen.

3. Do NOT try to fix the imaginary problem!
4. DO let the uncomfortable feeling(s) stay. Give it/them permission to be there.
5. DO use short, simple phrases to answer your worry – but you don't give it what it wants. We will cover some possible ways to respond next.



Think of it like this: if your worry is a pushy salesperson, you're saying, "No thanks!" and walking away.

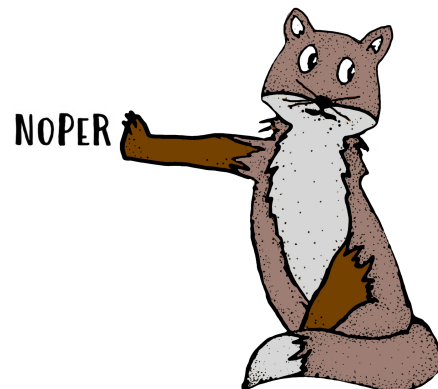
This salesperson is wildly pushy. They might say,

*"If you don't buy this you will be a loser!"*

*"If you don't buy this it means you don't care about your family!"*

*"This is the only chance to get this you will ever have!"*

*"This is the only thing that will keep disaster from destroying you!"*



Think of what your anxiety says. It is just like this, right? This salesperson knows exactly what will get to you. You must be soooo tough. They might

follow you around, but you must keep saying “No” until they finally give up.

To summarize:

1. **DON ’ T TALK TO THE WORRY ABOUT THE PROBLEM** (even if it keeps bugging you) no matter how risky it feels to ignore it.
2. **LET THE FEELINGS HAPPEN** (even if they feel awful). Here is the thing about feelings: They are just information. You don’t have to respond to information. You have a choice.

It will feel hard at first. Very hard. Your worry might yell even louder, get scarier, and more dramatic. At first it might go, “*The light switch might cause a spark*” then “*The spark might start a fire*”, then “*The fire will burn up your house,*” then “*You could spend your life in jail.*” It gets dramatic. That’s normal. Don’t fall for it. It is all imaginary.



## PART 3: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

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### WHEN SHOULD I USE A NOPeR?

Use it when:

- You feel **URGENT**, like you need to fix something *right now*. You have a feeling or thought that something bad happening is any minute.
- There is a strong **FEELING**. You might feel desperate, distressed, or panicked – something like that.
- You've already **THOUGHT** about whatever is causing this distress **A LOT**, but your brain won't let go. Even if some element might 'seem' new it is the same general thing you have been worried about.

These are signs your worry is trying to pull you into it.

### HOW TO USE A NOPeR

Here are a few very important things to know.

1. **THIS IS NOT AN INSTANT SOLUTION.** You will have to practice this a lot. You will have to stay consistent. If you stay tough for 10 minutes but then give in, you still will make progress, but it gives the worry a little boost to keep annoying you. You must stay with the NoPeR as long



as it takes and it will probably be longer than you think. Are you willing to do that? You don't have to get this perfect, especially at first. If you can do it even for a short time, that is the right direction. Keep practicing and you will be able to go longer until eventually, you can stick it out until the thoughts and feelings just fizzle out.

**2. IF YOU ARE DOING IT CORRECTLY, THE BAD FEELING MAY GET STRONGER AT FIRST.**

Normally, a bad feeling getting stronger means trouble but, in this case, it means you are **WINNING**. Don't get tricked by a stronger feeling.

Just stay with the strategy.

To not participate you need some things to say or do when the worry starts getting dramatic. Below some ways to do that. You may need to try them all a few times to find out what works best for you.

You don't have to say them exactly like what I am suggesting. You can use your own words. However, don't try to fix what the worry is saying is the problem. Your words must leave it UN-solved. So, for example, instead of saying, *"I don't think I will get sick,"* say, *"I don't know if I will get sick or not."* See the difference? Here is another example, instead of, *"I am sure my mom will come pick me up on time,"* say, *"I can't answer that yet, I don't know for sure."* I will give you five possible ideas below.<sup>1</sup>

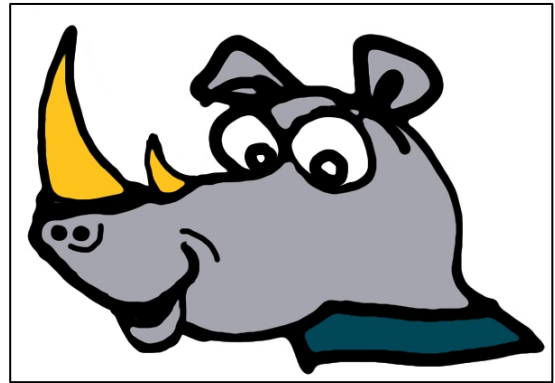
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<sup>1</sup> Some of these ideas were adapted from a lecture by Lisa Levine, PsyD

## 1. NAME THE FEELING

The first option is to say what you're feeling and allow it to remain. (Check out the feelings wheel at the end if you need some suggestions. It can be more than one feeling).

Your brain has a lot of different parts with different jobs. One part is the realistic logical part. It's the part that knows when you are reading a book about a 'talking' rhinoceros that there is no such thing as a 'talking' rhinoceros.



Or if you write the words 'fly shoe' it knows that writing the words will not cause your shoe to fly off your foot out the window. When you name the emotion, you are activating that logical part of your brain which helps control the less realistic part of your brain which is being very dramatic and far less realistic. Here are some examples of how to do that:

- *"Yep, I feel **WORRIED**. And I am willing to have that feeling."*
- *"I'm feeling **NERVOUS** about that (whatever the worry is dramatizing) but I'm not going to do anything about it and just let it be there." (Like watching a dumb movie. You can see it, it is still playing, but you are not involved at all.)*
- *"This feels **SCARY**, but I am willing to handle feeling this way."*

- *"I feel **GUILTY**, and I can handle that."*
- *"My stomach feels **UPSET** but I am willing to let it stay that way."*

## **2. DON'T ANSWER THE WORRY**

Has anyone tried to tease you, and you acted like they weren't even there? That is the idea behind this strategy.

- Give it the silent treatment. Don't say anything at all. Pretend you don't even hear it.
- You can think, *"No comment."*
- You can think, *"I'm not answering that right now."*
- You can think, *"Nice try, worry brain!"* (Best if you have a bit of attitude in your response.)
- More attitude, *"zip it skippy", "stop your yammering,"* or *"put a sock in it!"*

## **3. ACCEPT NOT KNOWING WHAT TO DO, WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN, OR HOW TO SOLVE IT**

Accept means to be willing to receive or agree to what the situation is right then and there. You truly don't know what might happen or what to do, so **ACCEPT** that you don't have all the answers right now — and let that be okay.

Sort of like you open your hands and receive something. It is like you aunt gives you the ugliest pajamas for your birthday. You just accept it. (It is good if you smile and say, *"Thank you,"* as you know.) You will want

something else, but you didn't get that so accept it. Agree to it. In this case, you want this (your fear) to be completely fixed 100%, but that is not what you have. So, the strategy is that you reply to the worry that you simply do not know the answer at this time or that there is missing information.

If you have sticky thoughts it is time to accept that no matter how long you spend trying to solve it, without the missing information (also known as the future), you cannot and will not figure it all out. This **NOPE** is accepting that is the deal. Here are some ways to say it:

- *I am willing to not know 100% (right now).*
- *I am not going to know for sure (right now).*
- *I don't know (right now).*
- *I am not going to know (right now).*
- *I don't know if I will ever know.*

#### **4. WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT THERE IS THE POSSIBILITY**

The sticky worry brings a powerful urge to fix or escape, and it will insist that you that you must know **HOW**, you must know **NOW**, and you must know **FOR SURE**. A “maybe” is not enough. This **NOPE** can be a bit harder because the worry will want you to think you have a **REAL** problem and that by accepting the possibility you are somehow making the ‘catastrophe’ more likely to happen. You may want to resort to your old strategy of arguing with the worry. Don't do it!

Imagine a bully says, “*You are a big doofus, and you are going to fail this school year!*” You will want to say, “*No I am not! I am making good grades!*” One way to beat a bully is remove anything to argue about. Instead, you could respond, “*It is true that sometimes I mess up on tests.*” Here are some ways to do that with the sticky worry. Add some “sass” to your response. The important thing is to accept the feeling of doubt and uncertainty.

- *Yes, many things are possible in this life like... (include far-flung examples like a meteor can hit the car, or bigfoot might exist).*
- *It's extremely unlikely, but strange and unexpected things are possible.*
- *It's possible (shrug your shoulders like who can know such things).*
- *Maybe so, maybe not.*
- *Could be, you never know.*
- *Probably/very well could be. Impossible to know for sure.*

## **5. RESPOND WITH SPUNK**

Say something that shows you can handle hard stuff. It important to really have some attitude when doing this one. Remember the worry is making up some major imaginary catastrophes. If a 3-year-old says, “*You are going to be in big trouble when I get hold of you!*” do you really need to run away? The fear talks big, but that is all it is. Respond with your best, “*whatever,*” or “*like I care.*”

- *“Yeah, that would a monumental hot mess. I’d have to figure out a way deal with it.”*

- *“Aww, that would be awful, terrible and the worst. I hope I would figure out how to get through it. Maybe I will, maybe I won’t.”*
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## PRACTICE MAKES PROGRESS

At first, **NOPERS** might feel strange or even make the worry worse. That’s normal. Your worry is used to you doing things *its* way. But the more you practice, the better you’ll get.

Try **NOPERS** when:

- You’re practicing something that makes you nervous on purpose like doing an exposure (facing a fear on purpose)
- A sticky worry thought pops up during your day.

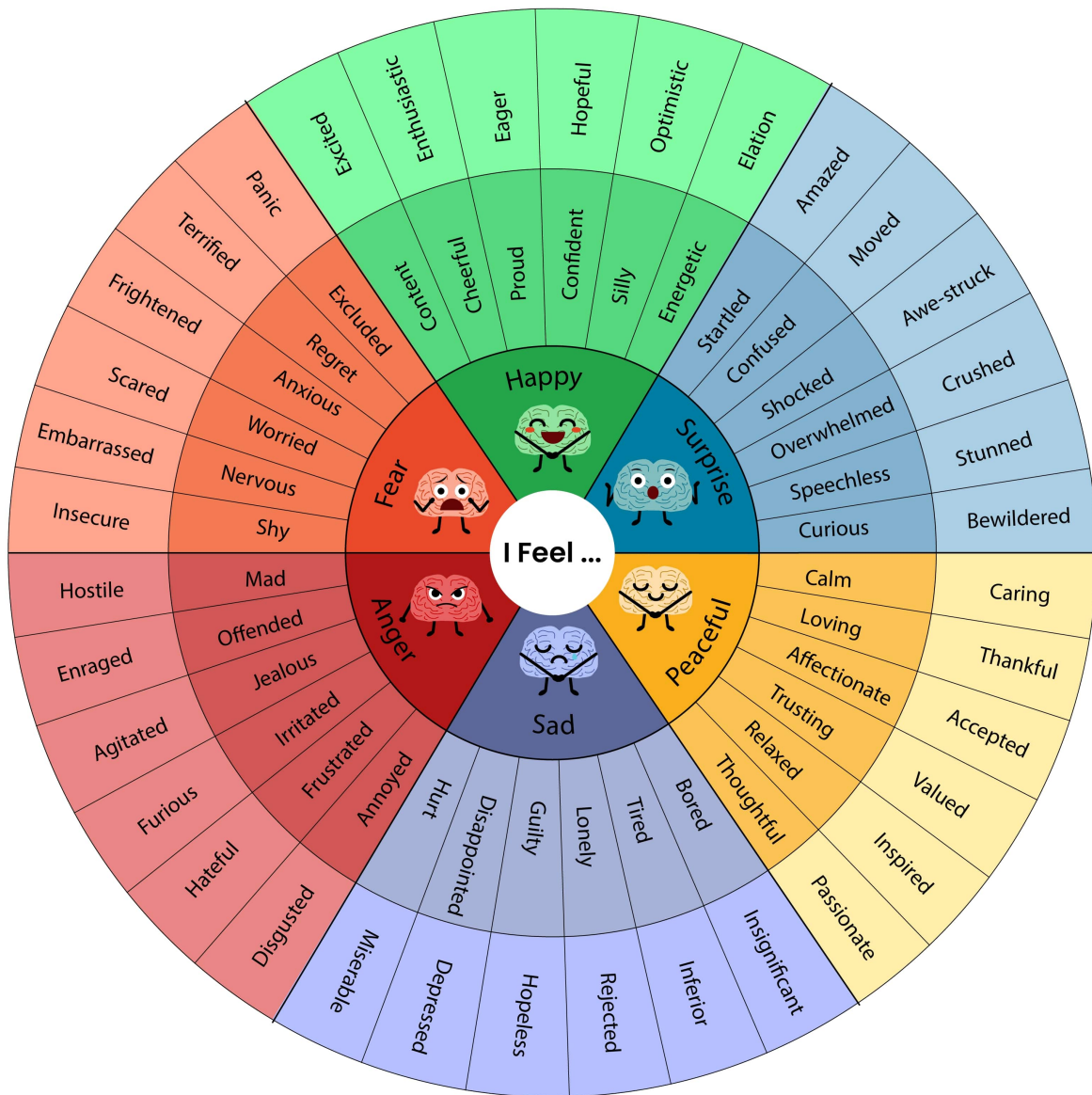
Don’t try to trick your brain with phrases like “It doesn’t matter” or “I don’t care,” because that’s trying to **make the worry go away** – and worry knows that game.

## THE BIGGEST HARDEST MOST IMPORTANT IDEA

You don’t have to fix every scary or weird thought. You can **LET IT BE THERE** and go on with your day. The same with a strong distressing feeling. **LET IT**

**BE THERE.** It's like a lion roaring at you in the zoo behind a fence. You see it but you don't do anything about it. Trying to fix it is going to be automatic so you must choose a different response.

You've can do this. Worry might try to stick around, but **you don't have to listen.**



from: <https://mentalhealthcenterkids.com/blogs/articles/emotion-wheel-for-kids>