The Functions of Worry in Uncontrollable Situations – Perceived Effects of Worry and the Feeling of Being in Control

SIMONA STEFAN 1
DANIEL DAVID 2

Abstract
The current study investigated the correspondence between positive beliefs about worry and the actual functions of worry, as they are perceived on the spot, in a stressful, uncontrollable circumstance. Participants (N = 79) were immersed in a stressful and uncontrollable situation, that of an impromptu speech. Half of the participants were randomly assigned into the experimental condition and were instructed to worry in relation to the forthcoming presentation, while the others were allocated to a mental distraction task condition. Results showed that, while worrying, individuals did not report the expected effects of worry and did not obtain a higher sense of control. Therefore, even if individuals generally think that worry is beneficial, they do not experience such benefits while worrying.

Keywords
worry; positive beliefs about worry; functions of worry; sense of control.

Worry is a pervasive human experience, and it has generally been defined as “a chain of thoughts and images, negatively affect-laden and relatively uncontrollable” and as “an attempt to engage in mental problem-solving” (Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky, & Depree, 1983, p. 10). Normal worry is mild, transient, and is experienced by the majority of individuals in various circumstances (Ruscio, 2002). On the other hand, when uncontrollable and unrealistic, worry can become pathological, leading to maladaptive consequences, like increased negative affect, interference with cognitive functions

1. Department of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, Babes-Bolyai University, No. 37, Republicii Street 400015, Cluj-Napoca, Cluj, Romania. Tel: 00 40 743 134536; Fax: 00 40 264 434141; E-mail: simonastefan@psychology.ro;
2. Department of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, Babes-Bolyai University, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York.