

10 Steps for Parents and Kids to Tame the “Worry Monster”

Daniel B. Peters, Ph.D.



Anxiety has become a regular part of our society and daily lives for our children (and ourselves). Worry and fear cause our children to feel bad, often cause parent-child conflict and stress, keep our children from fully experiencing life, and fully reaching their potential. As a psychologist, parent of worriers, and a pretty good worrier myself, I have learned that there are simple and effective strategies that kids (and parents) can learn to drive the Worry Monster away. Teaching kids about how fear and worry work in their bodies, and specific thinking and doing strategies to fight the Worry Monster, empowers them to take a stand against this bully.

It's time for us to take the Worry Monster down once and for all and turn our worriers into warriors.

Here are the 10 steps to do it:

Step 1: Teach How Our Brain and Body Work When We Are Scared

We all have a "fight or flight" survival response that is designed to keep us alive. We have a tiny ball of neurons called the amygdala (ah-mig-da-la), known as our fear center, that runs our in-body security system. When it senses danger, it sends adrenaline through our bodies to make us run fast and fight with one goal, survival!

Step 2: Identify Body Feelings

When your amygdala gets activated, you will feel the physical sensations of worry and fear in your body, especially your head, chest, stomach, and throat. This is because your heart has to beat super fast to get extra blood from your brain and stomach to your arms and legs so you can fight and run fast. The blood leaving our brain and stomach makes us feel light headed, have headaches, have stomachaches, butterflies, and make us nauseous. These feelings are our signal that the Worry Monster is messing with us! Any of them sound familiar?

Step 3: Externalize the Problem

Label your worries and fears as the "Worry Monster" who is a bully who is responsible for making you (and all of us) think worrisome and scary thoughts. The Worry Monster's job is to keep us from enjoying life. He gets joy from picking on children (and adults) and making them worried and scared. The more you talk about the Worry Monster and gang up on him with your allies, the weaker he will get and the sooner he will go away.

Step 4: Make a Worry List

Make a list of everything your child (and you) worries about. The Worry Monster doesn't like us to talk about him or how he works, so the more things you put on the list, the better. Once you have done this, put the worries and fears in order starting with the most powerful (severe) at the top and least powerful (mild) at the bottom of the list.

Step 5: Make a Success Ladder

Choose a behavior from the worry list and make a success ladder by breaking it down into baby steps, or rungs, with the ultimate fear or goal at the top of the ladder and the least scary behavior at the bottom. You will need to decide whether you can start with a single fear like swimming or whether the task needs to be broken into parts (looking at a pool) so that you can gain confidence by becoming used to each baby step along the way to conquering your fear.

Step 6: Identify Worrisome and Fearful Thinking

Think about what the Worry Monster tells you to make you feel worried and scared. Take out your worry list, and expose the Worry Monster's secrets by writing down what he tells you to make you feel scared and worried. For example, next to the worry "being left alone," you may write, "I might get left at school." Uncover what he tells you for all your worries and fears -- you are exposing him.

Step 7: Change and Modify Thinking

Next to the list of what the Worry Monster tells you, write down new thoughts that are healthier and more realistic. Ask yourself, "What am I thinking? How can I think about this differently?" For example, "I might get left at school," gets changed to, "I have never been left before" and "Something bad might happen to my mom," gets changed to, "My mom is strong and can take care of herself."

Step 8: Practice, Practice, Practice!

Choose behavioral practice activities to tackle the Worry Monster head on. Go to your Success Ladder and start doing the first thing on the bottom of the list until you are bored of it. For example, if you are afraid of dogs, look at a book about dogs until it is not scary and then go to the next rung on the ladder (looking at dogs from far away). Keep moving up the ladder and work your way to the top. Sometimes it goes quickly and other times you may have to practice something over and over.

Step 9: Develop a Coping Toolbox

Make a personalized toolbox to help you take on the Worry Monster when he shows up. This toolbox usually consists of strategies like deep breathing, understanding where in your body you feel the worry and fear, knowing what makes you start worrying or feeling scared, questions to ask yourself to challenge your thinking ("Is it true?"), statements to use against the Worry Monster ("I can do this!"; "Take a hike, you cowardly bully!"; "So what?"), exercise, and activities that distract you and help you relax.

Step 10 -- Don't Give Up!

Like all bullies, the Worry Monster does not give up easily. It takes a ton of courage and persistence to drive him away. You have talents to show the world and lots of life experiences to enjoy. By using these strategies, and working as a team, the Worry Monster doesn't stand a chance. It is time for him to pick on somebody else. Don't give up. You are a warrior. You can do this!