

Your Brain Rewards You for Worrying. Here's How to Break the Loop

5 MIN READ

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BY AUDREY JAYNES, MSW, LCSW

A Brown neuroscientist says anxiety works like any other habit: trigger, behavior, reward. The way out isn't willpower. It's curiosity.

As a therapist, it isn't often that I learn something that fundamentally shifts the way that I practice. It happened when I found values work, an approach from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) that asks clients to clarify what matters to them and *who they want to be*. At the time, my practice was anchored by a combination of CBT and mindfulness; effective and evidence-based, but limited in that it didn't help clients answer the existential question of how they want to live. Values work solved that problem.

It happened again when I discovered the power of the body. Through training in Internal Family Systems (IFS), I learned that a client's moment-to-moment somatic experience — think bodily sensations: *light, open, heavy, constricted* — is a potent indicator of what is happening for them emotionally and whether an intervention is working. It felt like discovering a missing piece.

And it happened recently, after speaking to **Dr. Jud Brewer, a neuroscientist and professor at Brown University** whose work seems to synthesize the most useful aspects of these three modalities — CBT, ACT, and somatic awareness — into an approach that is striking in its simplicity.

Why Worrying Feels Like it's Working

Dr. Brewer suggests that worry and other unhelpful behaviors like avoidance, procrastination, even binge eating can function like habits. Like most habits, they have a trigger, a behavioral response, and a *reward*. Habits form through a simple learning process: something triggers us, we respond in a particular way, and our brain registers what we get from that response. If the behavior provides some kind of relief, pleasure, distraction, or sense of control, the brain learns to repeat it the next time a similar trigger appears.

Simplified, the habit loop is: *trigger, behavior, reward*. And over time, this sequence can become so automatic that we barely notice we're doing it.

But first, how can worry be rewarding? When I ask Dr. Brewer about it, he says the process is typically twofold: first, worry distracts us from the physical (somatic) sensation of anxiety or fear. And second, worrying gives us a sense of being in control, as if we are doing something productive. In that way, worry initially provides a reprieve. The problem is that it doesn't end there. After a while, the initial relief diminishes because nothing is actually changing or being solved. The feeling reappears, the worry continues, and we feel stuck in an endless, unsatisfying loop.

A clear example is health anxiety. The **trigger** could be a bodily sensation or a frightening thought. The **behavioral response** is worry — perhaps mentally running through worst-case scenarios or searching symptoms online. And the **reward** is a temporary sense of control or relief: worrying feels like doing something, while also distracting us from the uncomfortable physical sensations of fear itself.

We worry because it works. And here's the crucial part: *the way out is to find a more rewarding alternative.*

Forget Willpower. Find a Bigger, Better Offer

So what do we do? Dr. Brewer is skeptical of the usual alternative: simply trying harder. "Willpower is more myth than muscle," he tells Super Age. Instead he posits that to stop the cycle we have to build a new habit, one with an even better reward. He calls this the *"bigger, better offer"* and suggests that curiosity itself can become more rewarding than worry. In his own words, "Curiosity is your superpower."

I know that can sound frustratingly abstract. In some ways, that's the difficulty of explaining Brewer's approach: its mechanism becomes clearest through experience rather than intellect. He's asking us to move away from thinking about what we are feeling and embrace a broader curiosity about the habit loop — the trigger, behavior, and reward — and the bodily experience associated with it.

What does that look like in practice? Instead of following the mind into *Why am I anxious? What if this happens? How do I fix it?* we become curious about the habit loop we've found ourselves in and the somatic experience beneath it. *What loop am I in right now? What is the trigger, the behavior, the reward? What do I feel in my body? Is it tight, hot, fluttering, heavy? Does it stay still or move? What happens if I simply notice it?*

That shift, from trying to solve the experience to simply becoming curious about it, is difficult to grasp until you feel it for yourself.

What Curiosity Feels Like in the Body

Brewer describes curiosity as the opposite of gritting our teeth and trying to force an uncomfortable experience to go away. As he explains it: "Curiosity helps us open to our experiences and see that we can be with them without having to do anything to

make them go away. They are not as scary when we get curious, and we realize that we have the capacity to be with them, even if they are unpleasant or it feels hard at first. That's how we develop distress tolerance.

This is also where the "bigger, better offer" begins to make more intuitive sense, and where the body comes in. Curiosity has its own felt experience. Where worry may feel tight, urgent, or constricted, curiosity can feel more open, spacious, even expansive. The difference is not merely intellectual; it can be experienced in the body.

What happens next is that we gain some distance from the habit. Suddenly, we are the observer rather than simply the sufferer. Instead of being fully enmeshed in the pattern, at the mercy of an automatic response, we can see it happening.

It is a little like emerging from dense fog into an open clearing. The fog is still there, but now we can see it from a distance, alongside the sky, the grass, and the trees. We have perspective.

Choosing Who You Want to Be

I ask Brewer whether we can take the process one step further, into values work. He says we can.

This is where I find myself connecting his framework back to ACT. Once curiosity creates even a little space around the habitual response, we have an opportunity to ask a different question: *Who do I want to be in this moment? What would the version of myself I am proud of do next?*

The goal is no longer simply to resist a habit. Instead, we're orienting toward the person we want to become. Repeated often enough, that can begin to feel like something larger than behavior change: an identity shift. Our sense of who we are starts to change right alongside what we do.

That's why one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is "who do I want to be?" To me, the goal of therapy is to move toward a more fulfilling life. And that requires an evolution of the self. Values work is what orients us toward

where we want to go, rather than only helping us understand where we have been. It's what moves us forward.

Brewer's work gives us a way to create the space in which that question becomes possible. Curiosity interrupts the automatic loop. Awareness of the body grounds us in what's actually happening. And values give us somewhere to go from there.

But as I said, this is something you understand best by experiencing it.

Try This the Next Time You Notice the Spiral

The next time you find yourself caught in an uncomfortable cycle you recognize, pause and get curious. Notice the habit loop: the trigger, the behavior, and the reward. Pay attention to what's happening in your body. See what changes when you stop trying to fix the experience and simply become interested in it.

Then ask yourself: *What would I do next if I wanted to feel proud of the way I handled this?*

That answer may point you toward something more rewarding than the old habit and, over time, toward the life you actually want to be living.

How to Break a Worry Loop

- 1 Pause when you catch yourself spiraling.** You don't need to stop the worry. You just need to notice it's happening.
- 2 Name the loop.** Ask: What triggered this? What am I doing in response (ruminating, searching symptoms, avoiding)? What is it giving me (a sense of control, a distraction from the feeling)?
- 3 Drop into your body.** Where do you feel it? Tight, hot, fluttering, heavy? Does it stay put or move? Describe it instead of fixing it.
- 4 Get curious instead of gritting your teeth.** Notice what shifts when you're interested

in the sensation rather than at war with it. Curiosity tends to feel more open than worry; that difference is the reward your brain can learn to chase.

5. **5 Ask the values question.** Who do I want to be right now? What would the version of me Iâ??m proud of do next?
6. **6 Repeat.** Each time you run this sequence, youâ??re laying down a new habit. Over time, the identity shift follows the behavior.

If you need support for anxiety or worry, Dr. Judson Brewer has a new program, **Going Beyond Anxiety**, that teaches you how to map your worry loop, pay close enough attention that your brain updates what worrying actually gets you, then hand it a â??bigger, better offerâ?• (his term), usually curiosity. In a randomized controlled trial published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, adults with generalized anxiety disorder who used his method cut their anxiety scores by 67% in two months, compared with 14% on usual care alone. Self-paced lessons, a private community, 24/7 support tools, and optional weekly live calls with Dr. Brewer. Plus, itâ??s HSA/FSA eligible.

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WRITTEN BY:



Audrey Jaynes, MSW, LCSW