

The brain system that stops worriers just going with the flow

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Cheer up Charlie, it may never happen...

(Medical Xpress)—Chronic worriers are more likely to use analytical thought processes when making decisions rather than relying on 'gut instincts', according to a new University of Sussex study published this week.

A team of [psychologists](#) reviewed the body of research in recent years

that has identified two systems used by the [brain](#) for processing information.

'Systematic processing' is characterized by effortful thought, often involving analyzing all the available evidence before coming to a conclusion. 'Heuristic processing' is the swift, intuitive response – the sort of reaction elicited by a sudden and unexpected threat.

In the paper, published in *Clinical Psychology Review*, Dr Suzanne Dash and her colleagues point to evidence that suggests extensive worrying activates the same area of the brain as systematic processing (the left frontal lobe), whereas heuristic processing is associated with the right frontal lobe.

Dr Dash explains: "We tend to use systematic processing when we feel highly motivated and also when our actual [confidence](#) in the decision that we are making is not as good as we would like it to be. In other words, it is a bit like an alarm bell going off in our mind – if something is important to us, and we do not feel that we have done as good a job as we can, we are likely to use systematic processing."

Although most of us worry from time to time, for some individuals, worry becomes a consuming and chronic chain of [negative thoughts](#) that they find very hard to stop. Dr Dash says: "Sometimes it is appropriate to give lots of careful thought to what might happen in an uncertain situation, such as buying a house. However, worriers give effortful, deliberative thought to issues that other people would deem to be less threatening, such as what will happen if they forget something or are not completely prepared for a meeting."

Worriers are more likely to endorse [perfectionism](#), find uncertainty more unpleasant, require more evidence before making a decision, have a stronger desire for control, and feel more responsible and accountable.

These characteristics, along with being in a negative mood, have all been shown to increase systematic processing.

Dr Dash says that through examining factors that increase systematic processing it is possible to identify areas that can be addressed in therapy for chronic worriers. "There are many reasons why worriers might feel that they are not confident enough and so use systematic processing. However, being aware of two systems of information processing allows people to think about when it is appropriate to use detailed effortful processing and when it is not appropriate.

"And within cognitive-behavioural therapy, it is possible to support individuals to manage unhelpful thoughts, such as feeling excessively responsible for a situation or needing to be in control."

The paper is titled 'Systematic Information Processing Style and Perseverative Worry.'

More information: www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0272735813001232

Provided by University of Sussex

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