

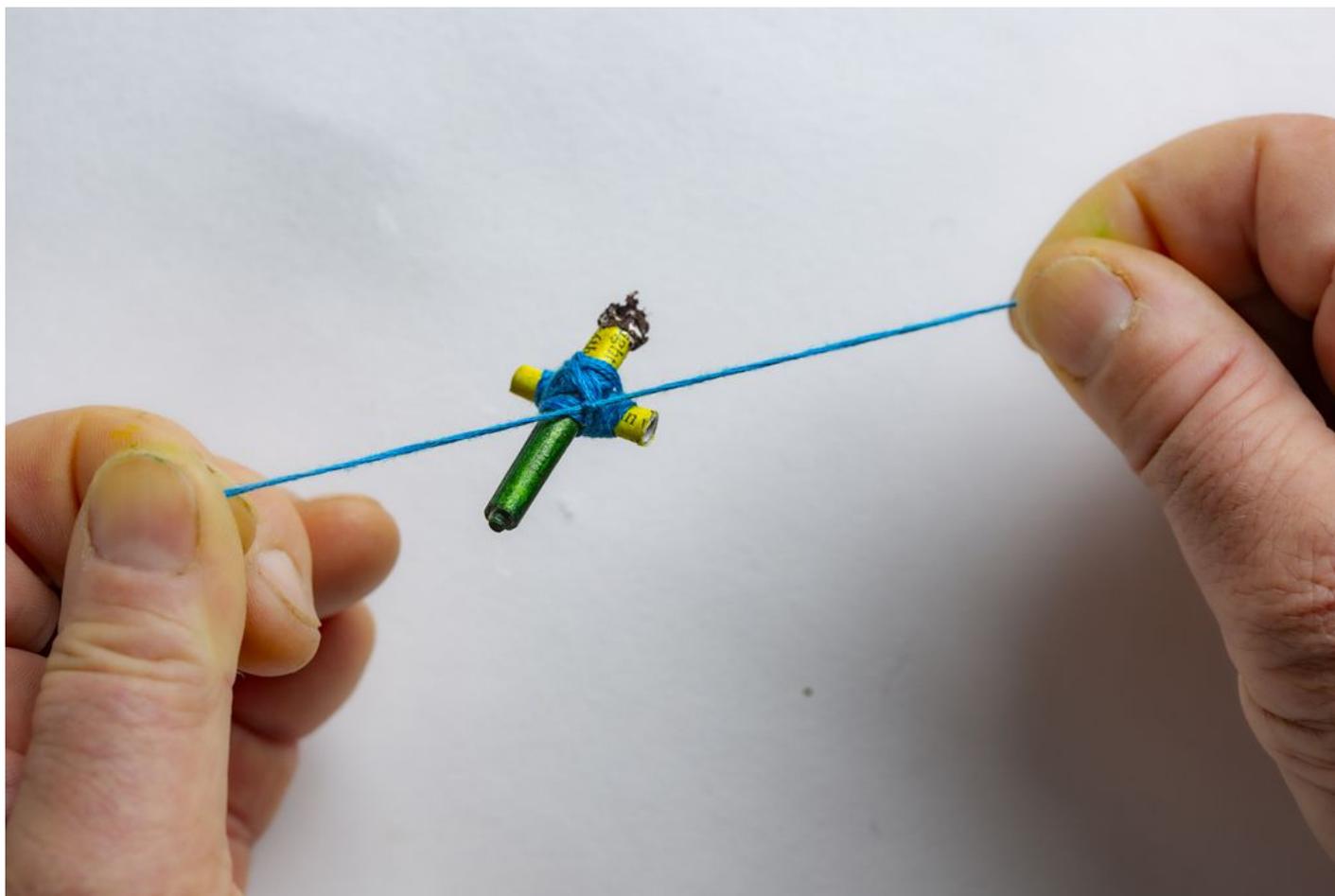
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IDEAS

Another thing to worry about

Use of the word “worry” is on the rise. Does that reflect our anxious time — or make it worse?

By **Julian Friedland** Updated January 20, 2022, 2 hours ago



A homemade worry doll. TONY CENICOLA/NYT

I’ve been struck over the last several years by how often the term “worry” seems to crop up, especially in headlines about current events. Some real examples: “Consumers worry about inflation.” “Americans worry about vaccine passports.” [“Worry burnout is real.”](#)

Google's Ngram, which tracks the frequency of use of words and phrases in published texts going back to 1500, verified my hunch that [this is a real trend](#). According to

Ngram, the frequency of the word "worry" tripled from 1992 to 2019 — the most recent year data is available — which means this was happening even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The frequency of the use of "anxiety" doubled in that time too.

It's interesting to ponder why the words are so much more evident these days. It could be that there's more to worry about now, or it could be because scary rhetoric gets more clicks for online publications in an advertising-funded ecosystem. But I suspect these trends also reveal something deeper about how we live today.

Americans have always tended to be obsessively focused on the future, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed nearly 200 years ago. What's new is that our age of technological convenience increases the data available to us and our expectations for how much we can control. One conspicuous example is the personal electronic stock-trading technologies that have facilitated and exacerbated an investment culture of day trading and short-term gamesmanship. The rest of us are like day traders, too, continually taking stock of the moods and apprehensions in our surroundings. Unfortunately, this habit also contributes to neuroticism and depression.

Fear is, of course, necessary. It helps us survive in a world full of impending threats. The trouble, as Aristotle pointed out, is that virtue in deficiency or in excess becomes vice. Prudence can agglomerate into an unpleasant state of perpetual anxiety. I am reminded of the film "Bridge of Spies," in which Tom Hanks plays a sympathetic FBI agent who keeps asking an unflappable Russian spy in danger of being tortured or worse upon his return home: "Aren't you worried?" To which the spy unflinchingly replies: "Would it help?"

His attitude embodies a deep wisdom best articulated by the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, whose teachings proved particularly useful during the Black Plague. His lesson is that it makes no sense to focus our energies on things that are not in our power.

That's not to say we should be unconcerned with such things as inflation, pandemics, or how much time we have left to live. It's just that worry can produce a kind of motivated reasoning that clouds our thinking: It leads us to see arguments in favor of conclusions we want to believe as stronger than arguments for conclusions we do not want to believe. It can also give us an inflated sense of how much we can control. We might try concentrating instead on what lies more directly within our power, so as to maintain the mindfulness needed to think coolly, calmly, and collectedly. Focusing on things we can change would be a good mindset for this psychically fractured moment.

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