

## “The Worry Tree”

*The Worry Tree* is a tool for children to use to let go of anxiety and the day's concerns when going to sleep at night. It is based on strengths-based and narrative principles: The child can use this resource by himself when he needs; the problem is externalised. The parent (or therapist) works with the child in a relaxed manner to create the tree. It could be a dead branch of a tree, pipe-cleaners, a drawing etc. The important thing is that the child borrows your confidence that this tool is fun and relaxing. There must be clear branches visible in the final product.

When it is first used the relaxed parent helps the child imagine in their mind each worry placed on the branches of the tree. Some children like to make or draw a leaf for each worry, some just visualise it. They do not need to tell the parent what the worry is; it's their worry! (My child visualised the tree and the worries, no tree was ever made, but he reported still using it into his teens!) As they lie down in their bed, help them to visualise (or observe) that tree near the bed, and to double-check where each worry is; we want to be really sure the worries are really there. If they need to do it again to be sure, go with that. Be playful, be patient. The more they (and the parent) invest in the process of discarding their worries, the better it will “bed down” internally in the child.

The purpose is to get the parent and child to playfully and calmly construct and set up this strategy. The child is told that whenever she needs it, the tree will be there, ready and willing to take their worries overnight. Through the night it will do the job of worrying for them. When they wake up in the morning, if they wish, they can take up their worries again. It's up to them. It can be good to mention that some children find they don't want to pick up their worries again in the morning. That's ok. But any night when worries have snuck up on them they can put the worries back on the tree before they go to sleep. That's where they belong at night. The tree can take it; that's what it is for! They have the right to pick up the worries if they wish, or to leave them there.

Some children report years later that their tree is still near their bed, bedraggled and tired looking, but they don't wish to part with it.

Some children say the worry tree doesn't really do enough for them. That's ok. Just affirm this and move to other strategies. Explain that it's ok to use lots of different things to help us to be happy people. But they can try it again another time if they wish.

It is important for the parent to respect the child's privacy, to be a non-anxious presence, and not to keep checking if it's working..... And to not move the tree or throw it out.

Happy not worrying!