

# separating yourself from other people's problems 41

## for you to know

Sometimes it is hard to keep from feeling anxious when people you know or love are feeling anxious. But taking on other people's problems only raises your own anxiety even higher and makes you more vulnerable to becoming overwhelmed.

Jasmine had a very close group of friends. They were in a lot of the same classes and went to movies together almost every weekend. Jasmine was a caring person and a good listener, so her friends often came to her with their problems. Jasmine always felt good when she could help them by giving advice or just sympathizing, but sometimes she felt herself worrying about her friends' problems for hours afterward. When she did that, she would get a kind of prickly, burning feeling across the top of her back and shoulders. She told her mom about it, and her mom said they should have the doctor check it out.

After listening to her story and examining her, the doctor told Jasmine that the feeling was most likely connected to her nerves. When she got too anxious, her nerves got "overloaded." It was a common stress reaction. He said that Jasmine needed to learn to let go of her friends' problems. She didn't have to stop listening or being a good friend; she just had to stop holding their problems within her.

The doctor gave Jasmine some suggestions for how to do this:

1. Remind herself about the worthlessness of worry.
2. When she is not with her friends and is still thinking about their problems, practice thought stopping.

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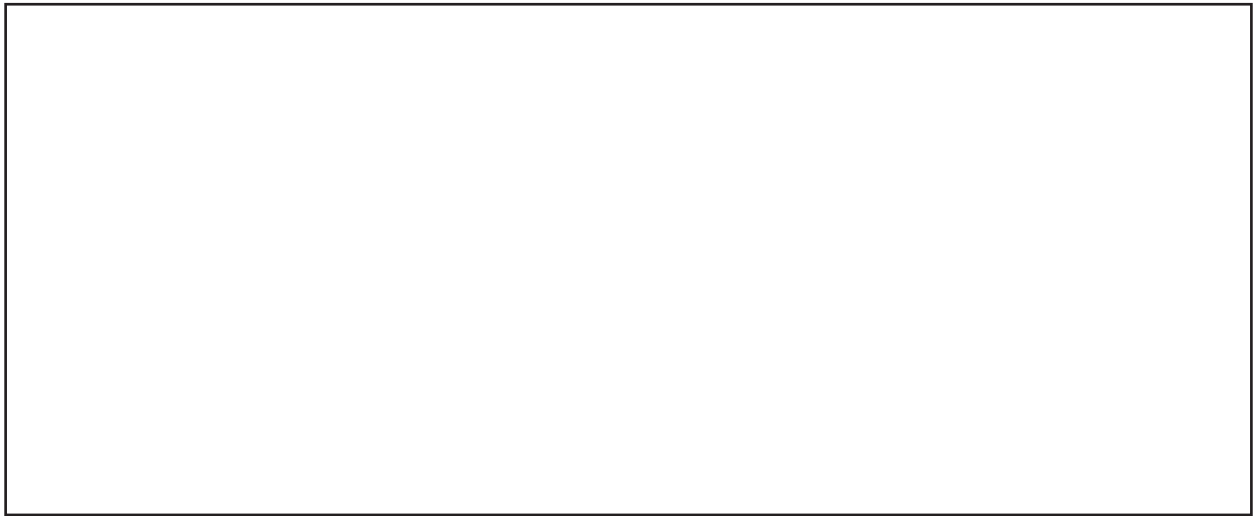
3. When she is listening to her friends' problems, picture herself with a special invisible shield around her. Love and caring can go out from her through the shield, but stress from their problems is blocked from coming in.
4. Practice visualizing leaving her friends' problems with them. After she has listened to her friends and is walking away from them, she can picture herself walking away from the problems, too. For example, she might picture the problems as little gremlins standing at her friends' feet or sitting on their shoulders. Or when she hangs up the phone after talking to a friend, she can picture the problems physically trapped within the phone line, so that when she hangs up, they stay in there and do not come with her.
5. Remind herself that caring about someone and taking on their problems are two different things. Taking on someone else's worries doesn't help them; it just drains her of energy that she could be using to be a good listener or for staying healthy in her own life.

Jasmine tried some of the doctor's suggestions. At first it was hard to separate herself from her friends' problems, but eventually she got better at it, and the burning in her shoulders went away. She realized she could be an even better friend if she wasn't overly stressed.

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directions

Think of a situation in which you feel anxious about someone else's problems. In the space below, draw a picture of yourself and that person. Draw your heart to symbolize your caring for them. Then use lines, colors, or shapes to show the anxiety that surrounds the two of you.



Draw another picture of yourself and that person when you have separated yourself from the problems. Again draw your heart to symbolize your caring, but this time, use lines, colors, or shapes to show that the anxiety is a good distance away from you. Draw a heavy line or barrier between yourself and the anxiety.



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## more to do

Describe how you feel in the first picture.

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Does your feeling anxious help the other person at all?  Yes  No

Describe how you feel in the second picture.

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Does your not feeling anxious hurt the other person in any way?  Yes  No

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Look at your heart in both pictures. How do you think feeling the other person's anxiety affects your ability to care about them?

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The next time you feel anxious about someone else's problem, try one of the suggestions Jasmine's doctor gave her. Describe your experience here.

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Continue to try the suggestions on Jasmine's list until you find one that works well for you. Or think of your own idea for separating yourself from other people's anxiety. Describe it here and then try it out.

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