

How to Stop Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing is a cognitive distortion that prompts people to jump to the worst possible conclusion after a minor setback. When a situation is upsetting, but not necessarily catastrophic, they still feel like they are in the midst of a crisis. When we feel anxious, our perceptions become more threat focused, so things appear to be more catastrophic than they really are. It is understandable that during the current COVID-19 pandemic many people have heightened feelings of anxiety and as a result may be experiencing catastrophic thoughts in the day to day.

One of the most common cognitive errors underlying catastrophic thinking involves exaggerating the effect of something negative, like believing that because some people feel a certain way, then everyone must. Or imagining that if one aspect of your life is going poorly, then your entire life is falling apart. All-or-nothing and black-and-white thinking are cousins to this mindset. When you engage in these types of thinking, it becomes less and less possible to salvage ways to be optimistic, because the whole of your perspective is being painted over with a negative brush.

Examples of catastrophizing:

- “If I don’t get this job I am going to be a complete failure and I will never work again.”
- “If I don’t get to work in time, everyone is going to think that I am useless.”
- “If I don’t have access to PPE equipment I will contract COVID-19 and then I will die.”

Causes

Catastrophizing is a belief that something is far worse than it really is. While there are several potential causes and contributors to catastrophizing, most fall into one of three categories. These are:

Ambiguity

Ambiguity or being vague can open a person up to catastrophic thinking. An example would be getting an email message from your manager saying, “We need to talk.” This vague message could be something positive or negative, but an employee cannot know which of these it is with just the information they have. So they may start to imagine the very worst news.

Value

Relationships and situations that a person holds in high value can result in a tendency to catastrophize. When something is particularly significant to a person, the concept of loss or difficulty can be harder to deal with.

An example would be applying for a job that a person wants. They may start to imagine the great disappointment, anxiety, and depression they will experience if they do not get the job before the organization has even made any decisions.

Fear

Fear, especially irrational fear, plays a big part in catastrophizing. If a person is scared of what is going to happen in the future, they could start to think about all the bad things that could happen, even when there is no evidence that this will occur.

Avoidance and safety behaviours are common ways by which we try to protect ourselves from perceived threats. These are usually self-defeating and ultimately serve to maintain anxiety in the longer term.

What you can do to help manage catastrophic thinking:

1. **Acknowledging that unpleasant things happen:** Life is full of challenges as well as good and bad days. Just because one day is bad does not mean all days will be bad.
2. **Remember that over 90% of the things we fear do not eventuate:** If you were to add up the number of times you worried about some imminent disaster, and then compared this to the number of disasters that actually occurred, what do you think you would find? Invariably the vast majority of the things you worried about never eventuated.
3. **Recognizing when thoughts are irrational:** Catastrophizing often follows a distinct pattern. For example, if someone prone to catastrophizing makes a mistake at work, they might believe they will be fired. And that if they get fired, they'll lose their house. And if they lose their house, what will happen to their children? And on and on. This pattern of thinking can be destructive because unnecessary and persistent worry can lead to heightened anxiety and depression. When a catastrophic thought arises, one can consider realistic possible outcomes in addition to the most extreme ones. Just because a situation is difficult now does not mean it will always be difficult or last forever. Scary thoughts and possibilities are not facts.
4. **Practice Mindfulness:** Catastrophizing can be countered by mindfully examining one's thoughts. Using mindfulness means observing a thought from a distance, without judgment, as it comes and goes—like leaves floating down a river.
5. **Saying “stop!”** To cease the repetitive, catastrophic thoughts, a person may have to say out loud or in their head “stop!” or “no more!” These words can keep the stream of thoughts from continuing and help a person change the course of their thinking.
6. **Thinking about another outcome:** To change your way of thinking, start small: What aspects of your home, your daily routine, and your loved ones continue to bring you joy and comfort? What pieces of your life still feel good to you? What parts of your life feel safe, make you laugh, bring you pleasure, and keep you relaxed? Don't let those be tainted by thinking in overgeneralized terms.
7. **Offering positive affirmations:** When it comes to catastrophic thinking, a person has to believe in themselves and that they can overcome their tendency to fear the worst. They may wish to repeat a positive affirmation to themselves on a daily basis.

8. **Practicing excellent self-care:** Catastrophic thoughts are more likely to take over when a person is tired and stressed. Getting enough rest and engaging in stress-relieving techniques, such as exercise, meditation, and journaling, can all help a person feel better.
9. **Get Physical:** Fresh air. Chopping vegetables. A run. The feel of garden soil on your fingers. A deep breath. A particularly good round of stretching. A hot bath. Hammering a nail. The soothing repetition of knitting or embroidery. These physical motions have all been shown to help people reduce anxious distress in the moment. This is, in part, because they bring you into the present by helping you interact in the here and now with your surroundings, making it harder to dwell on the past or the future. When you take a walk and see those individually changing leaves on that spectacular tree, you feel more clearly anchored in your world. It's mindfulness at its best, and the more physical you can be, the more you may benefit from exercise-induced endorphin surges as well.
10. **Use Socratic questioning to address worrying thoughts:** When we are in an anxious state, our mind is focused on the threat. For this reason it is helpful to use objective criteria to evaluate the situation. The following Socratic questions can be helpful during times of high anxiety, when we are predicting catastrophe or worrying unnecessarily. Because these questions focus on evidence rather than gut feelings they can help you to perceive your situation in a more realistic way.

Socratic Questions to Address Worrying Thoughts
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe the situation you are worried about? 2. What specifically do you fear might happen? 3. Rate the likelihood that this will happen (from 0 to 100%) 4. What evidence supports your worrying thoughts? 5. If your feared situation did eventuate, what actions could you take? 6. Realistically, what is the worst thing that can happen? 7. What is the best thing that can happen? 8. What is most likely to happen? 9. Are there any useful actions that you can take now? 10. What would you tell a friend who was in the same situation? 11. Realistically, re-rate the likelihood that your fears will be realized (from 0-100%)

Source: Change Your Thinking, Sarah Edelman (2002)

Source:

1. How to stop catastrophizing by [Timothy J. Legg, PhD, PsyD](#) 2018 — Medical News Today
2. 5 Ways to stop catastrophizing – [Andrea Bonior, Ph.D., Psychology today](#) 2016