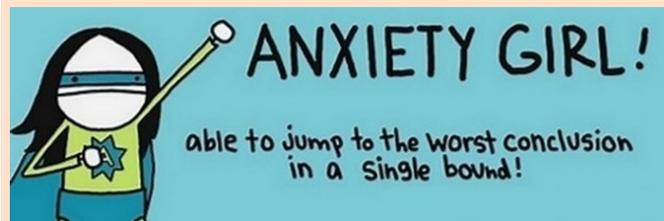




Catastrophic Thinking—and how to stop...

Catastrophic thinking can be defined as ruminating about irrational worst-case outcomes. It can increase anxiety and prevent people from taking action in a situation where action is required. Bad things—even horrible things—do happen to people and cause real pain in people's lives. But catastrophic fantasies cause useless suffering in our minds, whether there is a grain of truth in them or not. As Mark Twain famously said, "I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."



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How Catastrophic Thinking Happens

Overestimating the likelihood of negative events occurring.

Imagine that you have a smoke alarm that works correctly. It goes off when there is real danger as a result of a fire but does not go off when it shouldn't—such as when you are cooking something. Now consider having a smoke alarm that goes off not just for actual fires but frequently when it shouldn't. Anxiety properly managed is like the correctly functioning smoke alarm. Anxiety not properly managed is like the smoke alarm going off when it shouldn't.

Whether you are talking about a smoke alarm or anxiety, the common indicator that your signal is not working properly is overestimating danger. People who experience anxiety at levels which are uncomfortable and even overwhelming often overestimate the likelihood that negative events will occur.

Overestimating the likelihood of negative events plays a critical role in the following anxiety issues:

(1) Panic attacks are the result of the person believing catastrophic misinterpretations of their physical sensations. For example, someone might have a panic

attack as a result of believing that slight increases in their heart rate are indicative of an impending heart attack;

(2) In health anxiety, a person experiences ongoing anxiety as a result of believing that various physical peculiarities are indicative of serious health problems even though medical tests have determined that nothing is wrong;

(3) People with generalized anxiety disorder are characterized by constant worrying. Their anxiety is elevated both by their overestimating the likelihood of negative events occurring in their lives along with the belief that they would be unable to cope with these events when they occur;

(4) People suffering from social anxiety issues overestimate the degree to which others are evaluating and criticizing them and believe they cannot cope with criticism—real or imagined;

(5) In obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), a person believes that their negative thoughts will lead to catastrophic outcomes, leading them to engage in time-consuming behaviours called compulsions to reduce the anxiety they experience as a result of these beliefs.

Managing Catastrophic Thoughts

Catastrophic thoughts can be debilitating. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to address catastrophic thoughts.

The first step in addressing unhealthy thoughts is knowing when you have them. Self-monitoring is important to increase awareness of your thoughts, and how they impact your mood and behaviours.

Next, move your thinking away from extremes, and consider other options. So it can be helpful to ask yourself some of the following questions:

- What evidence do I have for this thought?
- What evidence do I have against this thought?
- Are there times when this thought has-

n't been true?

- Do I have this kind of thought when I'm feeling OK as opposed to feeling sad, angry, or anxious?
- What would I tell someone else who was having this kind of thought?
- Is it possible that I'm having this thought just out of habit?
- What might be an alternative, more realistic explanation?

Asking yourself these types of questions can help break the habit of catastrophic thinking and help you be more flexible in your thinking. In the end, this could reduce your anxiety, or prevent your anxiety from getting worse.

Three quick statements might calm and help:

1. "It's not happening now." It is possible that a catastrophe could occur in the future, but it's not happening now. This phrase may help you see that at this moment you are safe.

2. "Whatever happens, I can cope." This statement reminds you of your own inner resources and gives you the determination to meet the challenges of life.

3. "Could I stop?" Asking yourself a question tends to be more motivating than simply saying, "I will stop," or the judgmental, "Stop!" The question "Could I stop?" helps you see you have a choice.