

Catastrophizing

By Cindy Trevitt, Registered Professional Counsellor

"You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus."

— Mark Twain

Okay, is that really a word? Catastrophizing? Technically, no, but it's a term used in the mental health field to describe the act of making things bigger or worse than they actually are. When you use words like "awful", "disgusting", "terrible", "can't stand it", "sickening" and so on. This is used by the type of person who makes mountains out of molehills. A drama queen favourite (you know who you are!) and a long-time pet of those with anxiety or depression.

Have you heard of Chicken Little? Chicken Little is an old fable about a chicken who believes the sky is falling. She goes around telling all her friends (Henny Penny, Ducky Lucky, etc.) that the sky is falling. In actuality, she was hit on the head by a nut falling off a tree. She magnified that incident into something catastrophic and hence the phrase, "The sky is falling", is used to describe a hysterical or mistaken belief that disaster is imminent.

There's one in every crowd.

These are the people who freak out at a minor incident on the plane. They will begin to panic and shriek, "We're all going to die!" Life's little mishaps are treated with overblown gravity. "Why do bad things always happen to me?", when the bank accidentally charges them an additional fifty cents. The character *Bulldog* off the *Fraser* show was classic. If he misplaced his tickets, he doesn't take a beat to check around, he immediately assumes someone has stolen them and yells, "This is total B.S.!", while slamming his fist on a desk. These individuals are certain they will be fired because the boss had a sour face at the last meeting. They

believe their partner is on the brink of breaking up with them over some minor misstep. They are the ones who use CAPS in their emails with frightening frequency and you can feel your heart racing just from reading their messages.

Why do they have to create so much havoc? For one, this is usually a learned behaviour. People don't usually decide to be this way or often even know they're this way. Often times these people are the ones who haven't been listened to or heard in their young life. They feel they must make everything big and loud just to be heard. They believe somehow they aren't interesting enough or will be ignored. Or they believe that they only have two choices, overstate things or understate things. There is no middle ground.

This is the worst day of my life! I can't stand all this stress! I'll never get out of this situation! I'll never find a better job (or partner or hobby or home, etc.)!

They believe that everything in the future will go wrong and because they believe this, they almost make sure it happens.

This kind of view can affect your entire life. Your work, relationships and opportunities. If you believe bad things will happen it can lead to a self-fulfilling

prophecy of failure, disappointment and underachievement. This type of belief system can also lead you to feel limited from possibilities and the ability to go forward with your life. It is filled with self-pity and a hopelessness not even based on reality. Obsessing about failure can cause us to miss out on opportunities and become depressed.

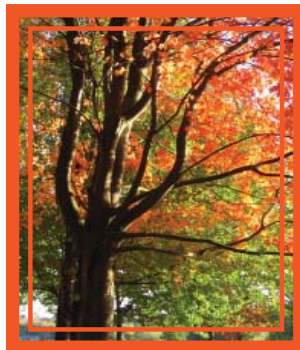
What if I lose my job? What if my car breaks down? What if my boyfriend/girlfriend dumps me? What if they don't like me? What if I can't get it done in time?

The catastrophizer lives a life fairly certain that the worst is going to happen. They are perpetually braced for it. Studies have shown that such thinking contributes to physical illness and pain.

Sometimes, even worse, they'll tell you that something bad is going to happen to you or is wrong with you or is going to be wrong with you! They'll bombard you with a steady stream of worries and uncertainties about your life. Symbolized by the stereo-typical worry-wart mother who steadily frets about you freezing to death, dead in a ditch, catching your death of cold, getting hit by a car, mugged, murdered by an axe-murderer (why by an axe, I don't know but that seems to be a favourite), or kidnapped by weirdos. Harbingers of doom foretelling horrible disasters.

"Dread of disaster makes everybody act in the very way that increases the disaster. Psychologically the situation is analogous to that of people trampled to death when there is a panic in a theatre caused by a cry of 'Fire!'"

— Bertrand Russell





Yes, you need to be aware of imminent and real danger but you must distinguish between reality and fantasy.

And dare I cast aspersions on *The Secret*, or *The Power of Positive Thinking*? What a concept! Stop focussing on the negative and start focusing on the real or the positive and you'll feel better! Go figure!

If you are one of these types, people may have told you so in many different ways. Perhaps you have heard that you worry too much, or you're too negative, or you make a big deal out of everything. This kind of thinking can be hard to be around. You may not be taken seriously because you have blown things out of proportion so often.

“Panic is a sudden desertion of us, and a going over to the enemy of our imagination.”
 – Christian Nevell Bovee

Of course, like waves on a pond, your doom-filled thoughts affect the people and your life around you...and not in a good way.

If you think you might be such a person, here are a few tips to help you change your ways. But, of course, like anything I'm not touting perfection here. I think a little exaggeration and colour makes life interesting!

STRATEGY:

1. Become aware that you do this.
2. Write down events as objectively as possible and then write down your thoughts and reactions and behaviours. Check to see if you're reacting to the facts or if you are magnifying the situation. A disaster is a major earthquake or tsunami not a stain on your blouse.
3. Expect more probable outcomes and possibilities.
4. Describe each situation accurately and specifically. The meal that was "awful and totally too expensive" can be talked about more accurately: "The entrée was \$18 and the sauce tasted bland." It's not the end of the world. It's just frustrating.
5. Ask yourself if you have any proof that the problems you are anticipating are realistic.



6. Decide what precautions you can take to prevent the worst from happening.

7. A little fear is understandable but trust yourself to solve whatever problems come your way.

8. If you find yourself worrying about a misfortune possibly occurring in your life, remember that the vast majority of calamities you envision never actually happen.

9. Consider this great question put forth by Marianne Ross, Ph.D., "Do you think catastrophizing makes things more stressful or less stressful?"

Read a little bit more about catastrophizing and other self-help topics at: <http://www.moodletter.com/Catastrophizing.html>



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