

What is Catastrophizing?

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Catastrophizing is an irrational thought a lot of us have in believing that something is far worse than it actually is. Catastrophizing can generally can take two forms.

The first of these is making a catastrophe out of a situation. For instance, if you're a salesperson and haven't made a sale in awhile, you may believe you are a complete and utter failure and you will lose your job. In reality, it may only be a temporary situation, and there are things that you can do to change this situation. Another example is believing that if you make one small mistake at your job, you may get fired. This kind of Catastrophizing takes a current situation and gives it a truly negative "spin."

The second kind of Catastrophizing is closely linked to the first, but it is more mental and more future oriented. This kind of Catastrophizing occurs when we look to the future and anticipate all the things that are going to go wrong. We then create a reality around those thoughts (e.g. "It's bound to all go wrong for me..."). Because we believe something will go wrong, we make it go wrong.

Falling prey to Catastrophizing is like striking out in your mind before you even get to the plate. Both of these types of Catastrophizing limit your opportunities in life, work, relationships and more. It can affect our entire outlook in life, and create a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure, disappointment and underachievement.

Both may lead you to self-pity, to an irrational, negative belief about the situation, and to a feeling of hopelessness about your future prospects. Further, both of these types of Catastrophizing will define either the presence or absence of alternative possibilities, and possibly paralyze you from going further with efforts toward your goals in life.

Battling Catastrophizing

The first step to dealing with Catastrophizing is to recognize when you're doing it. The sooner you do this, the quicker you'll be able to start focusing on stopping it. It may be helpful to start recording your negative thoughts to yourself on a pad of paper or little journal (or your PDA or such) that you carry with you at all times. Write down what happened as objectively as possible, what you thought about the situation, and then what your reaction or behaviors were.

Over a week's time, you'll begin to see a pattern emerge of when you're most likely to Catastrophize, and some of the thoughts or situations that most likely lead to it.

Now that you can see some of the direct cause and effects of your thoughts, you can begin the work on changing them. Every time you now want to Catastrophize a situation, you should answer yourself back in your mind:

“Sheesh, I already made a mistake on this report — I’ll never finish it, or if I do, it’ll be so full of mistakes, it won’t matter. I’m getting fired no matter what.”

“No, that’s not true. Everybody makes mistakes, I’m only human. I’ll fix this mistake and just try and concentrate a little bit more to try and do better in the future. Nobody’s going to fire me for a mistake or two in a report.”

or...

“I can’t believe I said that to my significant other! He’s going to leave me for sure this time...”

“I can’t believe I said that to my significant other! I’ll apologize and know that because he’s a flawed individual just like me, he’ll understand, accept my apology, and we’ll learn something from this experience.”

Stopping yourself from Catastrophizing takes a lot of conscious effort on your part, patience, and time. But if you try these few steps and really start answering yourself back, these irrational thoughts that serve no positive purpose will soon lessen in frequency and strength.

Before you know it, your Catastrophizing will be a thing of the past!