

Psychology

Do You Understand Why You Catastrophize?

by Ron Carucci

October 04, 2023



Andrew Brookes/Getty Images

Summary. Leaders who create doomsday scenarios out of everyday setbacks — what behavioral scientists call “catastrophizing” — risk spreading their anxiety to their teams. In this article, the author digs in to the psychological and physiological reasons behind this... [more](#)

As I was walking through the office of my client, Derek,* to review feedback I’d collected from interviews with his organization, I sensed an obvious dread in the air. People were quiet, heads down, and pre-occupied — a stark contrast from when I visited a few weeks prior. When I got to Derek’s assistant’s desk, I asked him, “Is everything okay? Everyone seems so gloomy.” He said: “Derek’s in one of his moods, and they’re afraid of what’s going to happen after you leave. A little while ago, he came out and asked, ‘Can you please see if there are any empty boxes in the storage room? I may need them later.’” I responded, “Why do you think he wants boxes?” He said, “He thinks he’s getting fired because of the feedback.”

Ironically, Derek's feedback was more positive than developmental. His bosses, peers, and direct reports thought highly of him, noting many strengths and great potential. There were a few areas where they called for improvement, most notably Derek's tendency to "go to the dark side," as one interviewee put it. Comments like, "If there's a worst-case scenario, Derek goes there first," and "I've never seen anyone react to the simplest of problems as if it were the end of the world," were pointing to his tendency to see threatening consequences in situations whether they were there or not. This is what behavioral scientists call catastrophizing.

Clearly, Derek was anxious about our meeting, and let everyone know it. Derek's tendency to catastrophize isn't that unusual. Some research shows that up to 70% of our thoughts are negative, so it stands to reason that, for some people, those negative thoughts can urge us to draw particularly disastrous conclusions, even if unfounded.

The Origins of Catastrophizing

If you tend to create doomsday scenarios out of everyday setbacks, it's useful to know that your brain is helping you do so. Jay Stringer, acclaimed author and licensed mental health professional specializing in specific forms of trauma, told me:

The thalamus is an area inside our brain's limbic system that integrates all our perceptions into conclusions about what's happening around us. From there, sensations are passed on in two directions: to the amygdala and up to the frontal lobes, where they reach our conscious awareness. Think of the amygdala as a smoke detector. It is on 24/7 and its job is to constantly detect whether incoming input is relevant to our survival and well-being. The amygdala operates quickly and automatically, always checking for potential catastrophe. If the amygdala senses a threat — a boss who looks menacing or a potential collision with another vehicle — it sends a message down our brain stem to recruit stress hormones to prepare for a whole-body response. Before we can even have a rational thought about an event, our body is preparing to mitigate any potential catastrophe.

Stringer explains that past traumatic events can distort our ability to accurately assess impending threats. The parts of our brain designed to detect danger and organize our body to respond are inherently good systems devised to protect us. “But when trauma or adverse experiences occur in our past, the hippocampus has been known to shrink 8 to 12%, which will negatively impact a person's ability to differentiate between past and present experiences,” says Stringer. “Therefore, rather than fighting to stop catastrophizing, work to understand the unresolved stories that may be influencing you to live in a frequent state of threat.”

If your catastrophizing is getting in the way of leading others effectively, or experiencing joy and contentment in life, here are some ways to begin addressing it.

Reflect on how you learned to expect the worst. Your choice to catastrophize isn't random. It's learned behavior. Be curious about how and when you may have learned it. Think about the origin stories in formative seasons of your life where you developed your capacity to foresee impending disaster. These stories may be painful to recall. But if you can recognize what need you're meeting by expecting unlikely disasters, you can then work to interrupt the pattern.

Sharon Melnick, PhD, best-selling author, business psychologist, and seasoned executive coach, told me, “It’s common for people with high control needs, often with perfectionistic tendencies, to catastrophize. They put a lot of pressure on themselves to achieve an outcome that will reflect favorably on them while unconsciously terrified that if the outcome isn’t perfect, they will be found blameworthy, and ultimately, unworthy.”

As it turns out, Derek was raised by exceedingly demanding parents with little tolerance for less-than-perfect performance. Whether his household chores, school grades, or athletic performance, when he fell short, he was demeaned and punished. A few months into our work together, he told me, “I knew my parents loved me. I always saw their pressure as driving me to be my best. It never occurred to me that my need to be perfect, my fear of falling short, and my unrealistic expectations of others stemmed from a desperate need to earn the love and admiration of those around me.” Derek’s catastrophizing drove him to peak performance while keeping the familiar narrative intact that told him, “You’re only valuable when you’re perfect.”

One of the stories Derek recalled was in high school when he was studying for midterm exams while also being a starting football player. Exhausted, he ended up getting a B on one exam and missing the pass that would have won the game that sent his team to the playoffs, both in the same week. His parents shunned him, and that Christmas he got no gifts. Understandably, any negative feedback Derek received triggered his flight response, just as the feedback I delivered took him right to an expectation of being shunned again, this time by his boss.

Create ways to interrogate faulty data. One of the ways to slow down catastrophizing is by interrogating the data you’re collecting to prove your prediction of doom. What cues are you focused on that are telling you the worst will happen? Are there circumstances, people, or challenges that regularly instigate your expectation of calamity? For me, when someone took longer than usual to respond to an email or message, I was certain the relationship was in ruins.

Investigate what you may be really avoiding rather than your manufactured disaster. For example, some leaders will imagine every possible tragedy, a form of “analysis paralysis,” just to avoid making a hard decision or prevent revealing that they don’t know something. Force yourself to create if/then scenarios — “if this happens, then I can...” — to broaden your optionality for response.

“Try to catch the catastrophizing thought early in the downward spiral, when you first notice it, before it activates a whole set of associations that convince you of its reality,” says Melnick.
“Require yourself to write out a full universe of outcomes, beyond the one you are over-focusing on.”

This becomes especially important at the back end of situations. Most catastrophizers feel a modicum of relief once the expected disaster doesn’t materialize, but in the same moment will believe “the other shoe hasn’t fallen yet.” Still, it’s important to contrast the *actual* outcome with the *expected* outcome. What cues were present the whole time signaling what was likely to happen that you couldn’t see? What signs of positive outcomes do you tend to ignore? Doing these post-event analyses will help you build a wider pattern library through which to screen future situations where you’re tempted to fear the worst.

Learn to regulate amid your catastrophizing. Many catastrophizers try and cover their feelings with fake positivity. But this alternative extreme only deepens the fear they’re trying to evade. Once we’re in a state of catastrophizing, we still have control over how long we let it go on. Says Stringer:

Eighty percent or more of the sensations we process pass from our body up to our brain, not our brain down to our body. Therefore, if we want to mitigate catastrophizing, we should first orient our treatment plan around the body. Too often we only try to change our minds without changing our body's self-state. Breathing exercises, spending time outdoors, and honestly labeling our true feelings have all been shown to bring more balanced perspective, allowing our parasympathetic nervous system to calm us, causing quick drops in the levels of the stress hormone cortisol. When our brain names our emotional life accurately, it secretes soothing neurotransmitters to calm down our amygdala.

Separate fears rooted in reality from those you fabricate. For some people, one of the challenges of catastrophizing is that their fear is enshrined in real experience. Past encounters of trauma or difficulty had real consequences, so the dreaded outcomes don't appear entirely unfounded, even if extreme. "People from underrepresented groups, like women or racial minorities, have experienced being passed over for hiring or promotions, or getting less funding from investors. Or professionals may have struggled for more than a year to land a job," says Melnick. "Memories of these real experiences can lead to generalizing the feared negative consequences, fueling more anxiety and prolonging the cognitive distortion of a catastrophe. It intensifies the conclusion that you don't have the power to change the situation, effectively cope with it or create an outcome unique to your situation."

In these moments, it's vital to distinguish the kernels of truth from past challenges from the doom scenario you've formed about what's coming. Remind yourself of times you've demonstrated resilience and come through challenges effectively. Interrogate limiting beliefs about how much control you do or don't have over the situation. Melnick suggests that you "find ways to activate your agency and take back your power rather than forfeiting it to the fear of disastrous outcomes."

Acknowledge the consequences your catastrophizing has for others. As a leader, your mood sets the tone of your team, division, or organization. Derek's worry about his feedback infected the entire team with anxiety. To maintain a healthy environment, you must acknowledge how your predisposition toward worst-case scenarios may affect them. If necessary, apologize and talk about what steps you're taking to curb this tendency. Otherwise, catastrophizing can become an emotional contagion that toxifies the organization.

For example, "The middle-manager who is deeply fearful of being berated by their boss creates a noxious culture for those under them. They catastrophize in part because they are trying to avoid being shamed by their superiors," says Stringer. "This creates a petri dish of anxiety and apathy in others. Employees end up trying to avoid mistakes and foreclose their creative and collaborative energy. They know their boss is not giving them their best and so they return the favor by underperforming."

Take inventory of ways your catastrophizing may have inhibited creativity, team cohesion, joy, or courage in your organization. How has it narrowed your perspective of team performance? Do people walk on eggshells around you, only telling you positive news? Says Melnick, "It's common for catastrophizing leaders to become more self-absorbed, focusing on themselves at the expense of the team or organization. Worse, it can lead to missing critical cues or opportunities in the market or organization." Whatever the consequences have been, resist the temptation to minimize or ignore them.

...

Rather than resorting to shame, guilt, or contempt, see your tendency to catastrophize as a messenger bidding you to be curious about the role it has played in your story. Show yourself kindness as you contemplate whether this habit is serving you well. To build hope that change is possible, replace stigmatized language like "I'm overreacting" or "I'm just so negative" with questions like, "How might I be misinterpreting the threat I'm seeing?"

Ultimately, accept that this habit is offering you an invitation to heal, grow, and learn. As Stringer suggests, “We need to learn to befriend our alarmed nervous systems. When we bravely and compassionately notice difficult feelings as they emerge, we learn how to respond *to them* rather than react *with them*.”

** Name has been changed; story used with permission.*

Ron Carucci is co-founder and managing partner at Navalent, working with CEOs and executives pursuing transformational change. He is the bestselling author of eight books, including *To Be Honest* and *Rising to Power*. Connect with him on Linked In at RonCarucci, and download his free “How Honest is My Team?” assessment.

Recommended For You

11 Things the Health Care Sector Must Do to Improve Cybersecurity



Why Debunking Myths About Vaccines Hasn't Convinced Dubious Parents



Performance Management in the Gig Economy



PODCAST

Do I Really Want To Be a C-Suite Leader?

