Decatastrophizing

Anxiety: Calming Worst-Case Thinking

Decatastrophizing is a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) skill for the moments when your mind jumps to the worst possible outcome. Catastrophizing means expecting disaster and treating it as likely, even when the facts say otherwise. The skill comes from cognitive therapy, which psychiatrist Aaron Beck developed. You answer a short set of questions that help you see the full range of outcomes and remember how you would cope.

1 How it works

Here is how one person answered the questions after a hard day at work.

Question	Example answer
What am I worried will happen?	*I made a mistake in my presentation, so I am going to lose my job.*
How likely is it, from 0 to 100%?	*It feels like 80%. Looking at the facts, it is closer to 10%.*
What is the worst that could happen?	*I get fired and cannot find another job.*
What is the best that could happen?	*No one noticed the mistake at all.*
What is most likely to happen?	*My manager mentions it, I fix the slide, and we move on.*
If the worst happened, how would I cope?	*I have two months of savings, a good reference from my last job, and friends who would help me look.*
Will this matter in a year?	*Probably not. I may not even remember it.*

Why does this work? *When you are anxious, your mind zooms in on danger and skips over everything else. Slowing down to rate the odds, picture other outcomes, and plan how you would cope brings that missing information back in. Once it is written down, the worst case often looks less likely and easier to survive than it felt in your head.*

2 Name the worry

What am I worried will happen? Write it down as the thought shows up in your head.

How anxious do I feel right now, from 0 (calm) to 10 (very anxious)?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Look at the whole picture

How likely does it feel, from 0 to 100%? How likely is it, based on the facts?

What is the worst that could happen?

What is the best that could happen?

What is most likely to happen?

4 Coping and perspective

If the worst did happen, how would I cope? Who or what could help?

Will this matter in a week? In a month? In a year?

A more balanced way to see it:

How anxious do I feel now, after answering these questions?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

If catastrophic thoughts are hard to shift, or they keep you from things you need to do, a CBT therapist can help you practice this skill.

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