

# 19

Chapter

# Catastrophizing? Accepting Uncertainty

Do you often worry about a tragedy happening to you or a loved one?

When someone you care about is late, do you worry that they are dead or badly injured?

Do you worry that your children will be abducted? And do you worry that they have been abducted if they are even a little late?

Do you worry the entire time someone you love is traveling or even commuting?

When you or someone you love has a headache, are you worried that it's brain cancer or an aneurism? Or something similar?

If you said “no” to all of the above questions, skip to the next chapter. If you said “yes” only to the last question, read this chapter, but Chapter 21 (on hypochondriasis) will probably be more helpful for you. If you said “yes” to any of the other questions, continue.

Life is uncertain. We are vulnerable and we are mortal. Bad things, even horrific things, happen in life. We are all fearful of catastrophic events, but most of us accept the uncertainty of life. **We realize that worrying about the unlikely possibility of these events is fruitless.** It's better to enjoy life now regardless of whether something terrible happens tomorrow, a year from now, decades from now, or never.

If you fret about the possibility of horrific events, you have two choices. One is to accept that life is uncertain. The second is to *not* accept uncertainty and continue to fret about things over which you have little or no control, such as fatal car crashes, terrorist attacks, or unexpected medical events.

When you think about these possible tragic situations, you may feel similar to how you would feel as if one of them were actually happening. At times, you may even convince yourself that it *has* happened. You feel panicky time after time, only to be relieved when a loved one arrives home safely or the emergency room physician or cardiologist gives you or a loved one a clean bill of health. But until you get the confirmation that everything is okay, you are living in an artificial reality, feeling the emotions you would feel if the feared event were really happening.

In addition to developing a bad habit of worrying, there are three possible reasons that you may worry specifically about catastrophic events. One is that something has happened to you to make you feel this vulnerability. You have already felt this horrible pain and loss and you fear having to live through another painful event. Interestingly, people who have lost a parent or been separated from a parent prior to the age 17 are much more likely to suffer from generalized anxiety disorder and depression (Kendler, Neale, Kessler, Heath, & Eaves, 1992). If this has happened to you, you may feel more vulnerable. The second is that someone close to you has suffered a tragic event. Supporting them and feeling their pain has left you feeling worried about such a

tragedy happening to you. If any of these situations apply to you and this workbook doesn't lead to satisfactory results, you may want to see a therapist who specializes in trauma. Processing these events with EMDR (eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing), prolonged exposure, and other experiential strategies can be particularly helpful.

The third possibility is that repeatedly seeing tragic events in the news can sensitize you to the possibility that you, too, could be a victim. Even hearing about a tragedy through word of mouth can affect us. Hundreds of years ago, we heard only of tragedies in our own communities and in neighboring communities. In addition, terrorism wasn't as common then and weapons are becoming increasingly deadly. Finally, automobiles have exponentially increased the likelihood of tragic events, not to mention safer forms of modern-day transportation that still add to the threat of tragedy. Avoiding watching the news isn't always effective, as we may still hear about these painful events on social media and in conversation. However, it might be helpful to limit watching news coverage. It's certainly worth experimenting for a week or so to see whether you feel better.

With all of the horrible things that happen in the world, it's understandable that you want to try to control them by preventing them from happening. The fact is that worry will not prevent tragedies. The irony is that the very things you are doing to try to control your life are actually making your life more out of control. Your worry about these events may frustrate others. You may be irritable or find it difficult to concentrate, sleep, or relax. You might have headaches, have stomach aches, or feel nervous or jittery much of the time. Maybe you are fatigued from wearing yourself out with anxiety.

Describe the ways in which your worry about catastrophic events makes your life more out of control.

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Keeping this in mind, on a scale of 0–10, how much are your worries about catastrophes controlling your life in a negative way? (0 = no negative impact, 10 = completely controlling your life.)

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Now consider to what extent your worries are giving you control—that is, to what extent do you believe your worries are helping to prevent bad things from happening? What is your level of control over tragic events on a scale from 0–10? (0 = no control, 10 = complete control.)

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Hopefully, you are more motivated than ever to manage your worries about tragedy now that you are more clearly seeing that your worry about catastrophic events is controlling your life in a negative way while making it no less likely that they will happen. Worry prevents you from enjoying life fully. Furthermore, you may find yourself in your eighties without having suffered a significant tragedy and regret having spent your life worrying about things that never even happened.

However, if you rated your level of control above a 2, you likely have a false sense of control. In this case, read the next chapter—“Superstitious? What’s the Evidence?”—to address this. However, you may continue to work on this chapter first.

**Regardless of why you catastrophize, it can be helpful to think of your reaction as an artificial reality, alternate reality, or simply “fiction.”** In fact, you can simply label these types of thoughts. Remember in Chapter 4 when you practiced labeling your worries as “new” or “repeat” and as “helpful” or “not helpful”? If you found that exercise useful, labeling your worries as “fact” or “fiction” should be particularly helpful when you are catastrophizing. Label a thought as “fact” when you know it is true and “fiction” when you make up a story in your mind about the worst possible scenarios. Even in the very rare event that things do turn out poorly, it’s never exactly as you imagine, so labeling these thoughts as “fiction” is accurate. It may also help you to come up with facts that are helpful. For example, if you’re worried that your spouse or child has been in a car accident and you begin to label these thoughts as “fiction,” perhaps one of the following facts may also come to mind: “I’ve worried about this hundreds of times and the worst thing that happened was a fender-bender,” “Worrying about it won’t give me control over it,” or “If there’s been an accident they’re more likely to be caught in the traffic than involved in the accident.” Also try labeling your thoughts as “useful” or “not useful” because these worries are never, or very rarely, useful. If they are useful, they are only useful insofar as problem-solving can be accomplished (e.g., take a different route or stop at a hotel if winter driving conditions are dangerous).

If you are like most people who suffer from this type of worry, you recognize the futility. You realize that worrying about it won’t change the outcome and you probably also recognize that things usually turn out better than you feared. Even when things turn out poorly, you recognize that, had you worried more, it wouldn’t have had a positive effect on the outcome. Unfortunately, even though you know these things, it hasn’t changed your habit. You continue to worry. The good news is that, if thinking of these thoughts as an alternate reality or artificial reality, labeling “fact” or “fiction,” or using other labels isn’t helpful enough, the self-monitoring form on page 99 has been very useful for many people. It can help you to internalize reality such that you can likely begin to feel the futility of these worries in a way you haven’t before.

People who worry excessively about tragedy may check things excessively or avoid situations that are generally safe. See Chapter 15 for more information about how to stop these behaviors.

The following are examples of safety behaviors that you may want to stop or reduce. Engaging in these behaviors negatively reinforces these behaviors. They are likely to raise anxiety and make you exaggerate the likelihood that a tragedy will occur.

- Checking doors and windows.
- Calling or texting to check up on a loved one who is traveling.
- Insisting that a loved one contact you at every leg of a trip.
- Excessive prayers for safety. Honor your religious practices, but avoid increasing your praying to manage your worry.
- Texting or calling a loved one who is only a few minutes late.

- Avoiding driving in any number of situations. For example, avoiding driving on highways, in the rain, at night, or in new places.
- Bringing along a “safety” person. (There is safety in numbers in some situations such that it may be healthy to bring a person along. However, try to go alone when you feel compelled to bring a person along who only makes you “feel” safe and when that person is not truly providing protection or the level of protection is greatly exaggerated.)
- Overusing alarms, mace, or weapons when in a generally safe area.

All these can be used as crutches that can negatively reinforce your fears and strengthen these fears in the long run. If you didn't already address these when reading Chapter 15, on removing crutches, consider using the monitoring form on p. 77.

If you are having difficulty letting go of these worries because you think that worrying can either prevent tragedy or reduce the emotional pain you feel if a tragedy does occur, then read the next chapter.

On the form on the next page, make an entry for everything you worry about that you are likely to know the outcome of within about a month. Just write enough that you will recognize your worry; details aren't necessary. However, feel free to write details if you believe it will be helpful for you to get them out of your mind and onto paper.

Once you have recorded a worry on the form, wait until you learn the outcome of the worry. When you know the outcome, write a brief description of what actually happened and assign a number that best describes that outcome using the key at the top of the form. Most of the time, you will do nothing more. However, if the outcome is as bad or worse than you feared, decide how well you handled it and assign the appropriate rating. Use the same ratings for the outcome and how you handled it. Then in a month or so look back at your ratings and note how many of the worries turned out better than you feared. If you are like most people, engaging in this monitoring will help you to internalize these things that your wise mind knows to be true, but that your worried mind currently still frets about. After a few weeks, it is likely you will internalize the fact that worry is futile, even harmful, and that things usually turn out better than you had feared.

Feel free to add other worries. In other words, you don't have to restrict this monitoring form to catastrophic worries. It can be helpful to record any worry you expect to learn the outcome of soon.

# Worry Outcome Diary

1 = Much better than feared    2 = Better than feared    3 = About the same as feared    4 = Worse than feared    5 = Much worse than feared

Worry	Reality	Outcome Rating	If 3 or Above, How I Handled It	Am I Glad I Worried About It?