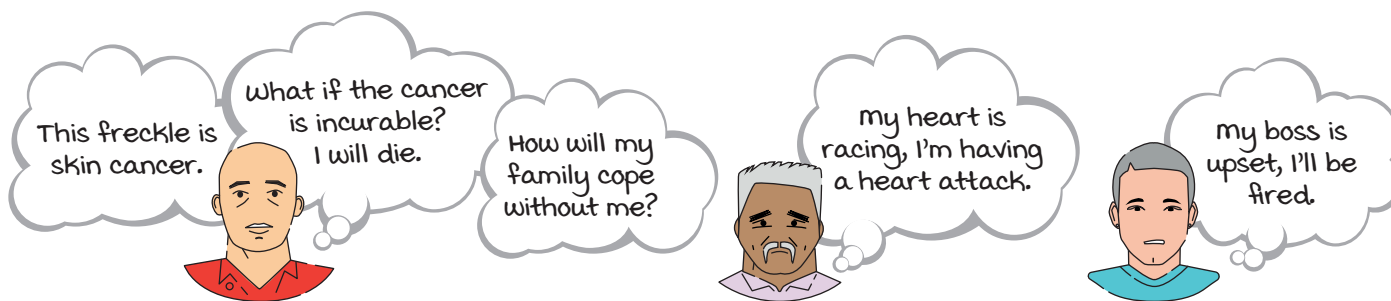# Catastrophizing

When we feel strong emotions – such as fear, sadness, shame, or hopelessness – we have often just had an *automatic thought*. These thoughts can happen so quickly and effortlessly that we are not even aware of having had them. It can take practice to notice them as they arise. Automatic thoughts often feel convincing, but they are not always 100% accurate.

They are often *exaggerated*, *biased*, *distorted*, or *unrealistic*. There are different types of biases, which psychologists call *cognitive distortions* or *unhelpful thinking styles*. We all think in exaggerated ways sometimes, but it can become a problem if your thoughts are distorted very often or very strongly.

Catastrophizing describes a style of thinking where you automatically imagine the worst possible outcome to any scenario. We all do it, but if you are in the habit of 'buying into' these catastrophic thoughts it can leave you feeling very anxious. People who catastrophize often have a *"What if … ?"* thinking style that happens automatically, especially when they are faced with uncertain or ambiguous situations. When you catastrophize you might assume that the worst will happen and picture yourself not being able to cope.

Catastrophic thinking is most commonly associated with different types of anxiety, but it's also linked to other problems.

Panic Generalized anxiety Health anxiety Social anxiety OCD PTSD Chronic pain Insomnia

Overcoming catastrophizing

Noticing and labeling

The first step in overcoming your catastrophizing thoughts is to catch them. Practice *self-monitoring* so that you get better at catching your catastrophizing thoughts as they happen. When you notice one, say something to yourself like:

- "There's another catastrophizing thought again."
- "I notice I'm having a catastrophising thought."

Postpone your worries

If you catastrophize by asking yourself a lot of *"What if …?"* questions, you could practice postponing your worries.

- Choose a time each day when you will do your worrying (e.g. 30 minutes at 6pm).
- When worries pop up during the day say to yourself "I will worry about this in my worry time" and then focus on something else.
- During your worry time consider writing down any of the worries that you remember having had throughout the day. How concerning are they to you now?

Calming and soothing strategies

Catastrophizing can activate your fight & flight system and make you feel even more anxious. Soothing strategies like slow relaxed breathing can help you bring things back into balance.

Slow your breathing:
- Breathe in slowly for a count of 3.
- Then breathe out slowly for a count of 3.
- Repeat for 3 minutes.

Evaluate your thinking (decatastrophizing)

Practice putting your catastrophizing thoughts in perspective by asking yourself these questions:

- "What is most likely to happen?"
- "If the worst did happen, what could I do to cope with it?"
- "How often do my catastrophizing thoughts come true?"
- "What is a helpful and realistic way of thinking about this?"

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