Dismantle Catastrophic Thinking

*Catastrophizing - focusing on the worst possible outcome, however unlikely, or thinking that a situation is unbearable or impossible when it is really just uncomfortable.*

It is common to worry about things that have not yet happened, however catastrophic thinking can distort the reality of what may actually happening and even serve to facilitate a self-fulfilling prophesy, influencing a greater likelihood of a negative outcome. Worry itself is not always a problem: it depends on whether your level of worry motivates you or paralyzes you, however, even when serving as a motivator, the price is high, because the motivational source is negative, creating stress and anxiety for you, as opposed to self-motivation with an internal voice of encouragement.

**Why do people catastrophize the potential future?**

The function of catastrophic thinking is self-protection; it is an evolutionary survival mechanism. By imagining the worst-case scenario, your brain is giving you an opportunity to prepare for the worst. However, because in some people the brain cannot differentiate between a perceived hypothetical threat and a real threat, it reacts as if under real threat, and overwhelming levels of panic are experienced. This is usually seen in people with a history of trauma or abuse, or a history of repeated disappointment, influencing the brain to naturally operate in a fear and worry state. The result of catastrophic thinking is anxiety, depression, procrastination and lack of motivation, which can then lead to further worry, anxiety, depression, and inability to function; the person becomes ‘stuck’ in a vicious circle.

**Interrupt catastrophic thinking:**

1. **Develop body awareness:** recognise what you are thinking. When you begin to feel nervous in your body, take a moment to stop what you are doing and try to connect with the feelings and sensations in your body.
2. **Notice your thoughts:** When you are able to recognise what you are thinking, you empower yourself to move on top of these thoughts, instead of being a victim to them, and to then make a decision about how you want to respond to them. You cannot stop them flooding you, but you can take charge of the response.
3. **Choose a calm response:** Tell yourself that right now ‘I am safe’ and ‘I am not in a life-threatening situation’. This reduces the intense survival threat that your body is experiencing, and thus, enables anxiety to ease. When your level of anxiety eases, the rational part of your brain is better able to start functioning making way for rational thought to begin to have impact and override fear and worry thoughts.
4. **Describe the process of your thinking:** Stay focused on the facts of what you are telling yourself about what is going to happen. It can help to write these down as bullet points
5. **Challenge these thoughts:** Ask yourself, ‘Is what I am thinking a factual reality, or a fear?’ ‘How likely is what I fear, actually going to happen?’ ‘What other possible outcome may happen?’ ‘How could I respond if my fears do happen?’ ‘Regardless of what may be, what is worrying actually giving me?’
6. **Identify where you have power to influence outcome:** Ask yourself, ‘What about this situation is within my control?’ To any aspects out of your control, try to let it go, because there is nothing you can do right now, and worrying is only hurting you.
7. **Choose positive, encouraging a rational thought:** Once you begin to challenge your fears and worries, and recognise that worrying is doing nothing for you except making you anxious and unable to operate as you wish, consider the thoughts that could actually support you in taking the action you now want to make, and attaining the outcome that you do want.

Remember, you can choose the thought that you give energy and focus to. Your thoughts cannot control you unless you allow them to. Whatever thoughts enter your mind, you can always choose a calm, encouraging, loving and supportive response.