

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Catastrophizing

When a person experiences an unhelpful emotion (eg, depression or anxiety), it is usually preceded by a number of unhelpful self-statements and thoughts. Often there is a pattern to such thoughts and we call these, "unhelpful thinking styles". One of the things we have noticed is that people use unhelpful thinking styles as an automatic habit. It is something that happens out of our awareness. However, when a person consistently and constantly uses some of these styles of thinking, they can often cause themselves a great deal of emotional distress. One of these thinking styles is called "catastrophizing".

When someone says "you're blowing things out of proportion", or "you're making a mountain out of a molehill", chances are the person is catastrophizing. This style of automatic thinking often begins with the following phrases; "What if !!!" or "Oh no! ..." Let's try some examples. "What if I blush in front of people and they realise I am anxious!" "Oh no! I have a chest pain! I might be having a heart attack" "What if I disagree with my partner on this I will lose an important relationship!" "I feel depressed this morning...what if I will stay depressed?"

All of these examples get at the essence of this unhelpful thinking style - that the person views the situation as terrible, awful, dreadful and horrible. Sometimes unhelpful thoughts will also include other unhelpful thinking styles - notice, for example, the appearance of a bit of overprediction and a bit of jumping to conclusions, as well as catastrophizing.

Let's look at this final example. Have you ever submitted a project, perhaps at work, and then realised that you'd made a small error? You might think "I can't believe I made that mistake. This is going to be a poor submission, I'm going to lose the account and probably lose my job. I'll probably never find work in this city again!" What do you think it would be like for someone with this style of thinking? Even though the reality is that the problem itself is quite small, when we catastrophise, things can get very big very quickly, and we can work ourselves up to a point where it all seems beyond our control.

Can you think of a situation where you have used this thinking style?

Briefly describe the situation.	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?



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