Catastrophizing, by Will Van der Hart

*I have a terrible headache and suddenly start worrying if I have a brain tumour. My daughter is a few minutes late from school and begin to fear that she has been abducted. My boss gives me an odd look and I start to wonder if I am about to be made redundant.*

We have all been there, at least those of us who catastrophise have been there: Relatively innocuous thoughts or experiences initiate a chain reaction of possibilities which ultimately lead us to a position of catastrophic terror. Catastrophizing has two elements:

*1) A biased prediction towards a negative outcome.*

*2) Intolerance of the negative outcomes.*

Catastrophizing can seem almost comical when we hear someone else describe it, but when we are in that spiral it is deeply distressing. Many MASF users describe their daily experience as being an unrelenting walk through the scariest possibilities imaginable. External triggers in the environment or media are prompt new and unexpected routes to terror.

Why some people more dispositioned toward catastrophizing that others is probably linked to their anxiety levels as the whole process has an intended protective function. 'Praemonitus, praemunitus' roughly translates a ‘Forewarned is Forearmed’ showing that this proverb has been around for a lot longer than the 500 years it has been in English print.

Catastrophizing is the minds way of forewarning you of circumstance that could prove dangerous or at least threatening. In truth, every health mind provides this function. If you are standing next to a bonfire you may visualise yourself being burned a as a protective function. The issue with catastrophizing is the lack of bonfire, and the extreme and convoluted journey between stimulus and destination.

When we scrutinize it; ‘Forewarned is Forearmed’ is limited wisdom. The fire may be hot, but you could not predict tripping and falling into it. Cancer is dangerous but you cannot stop it from appearing by worrying. Terrorism is a possibility but not a predictable one: The point is, forewarning rarely protects us from reality, if anything it just leaves us living in a haze of anxious discomfort.

Rumination, escalation, and low confidence all fuel the power of the process: Rumination is the process of overthinking and exploring threats. Escalation is in unwarranted magnification of these threats and their probability. Low confidence is important because it leaves the individual believing that they would be unable to cope with the outcome should it occur. Ironically these 3 elements spiral into each other to keep the cycle alive. The less I believe I can cope the more threatening the situation appears and the greater it escalates! You get the idea.

So how can you break the cycle?

Imagine your mind is like a railway station and the trains are thoughts that stop at your platform. The first step to recovery is to accept that you cannot stop the trains from arriving and opening their doors to you. In fact, attempts to do this (suppression, repression or denial) usually lead to even more frequent scary and thoughts.

Whilst you cannot stop the trains that arrive at your platform, you can decide not to get on board when they open their doors! I use the tube in London every week, multiple trains arrive at my home stop that have different destinations despite there being just 2 tracks. It is a discipline to resist the urge just to jump on board and sit down, if you do, you are going to end up at the wrong place for sure.

Catastrophic thoughts tend to have a very strong draw about them. After all, they usually present themselves as a life of death matters! The result is that we tend to ‘jump on that train’ straight away without thinking about the destination. Of course, with catastrophizing, the destination is never resolution, clarity and reassurance it is despair, confusion and more terrifying thoughts!

Mindful awareness, is simply the process of remaining on the platform and allowing the thought train to leave without you on board. I find it helpful the label these thoughts with a casual detachment, “Oh look, there’s my ‘Your dying of cancer thought.’” Or “There is the, ‘You are going to screw everything up and get totally humiliated’ thought.” Somehow by labelling, our minds are more able to observe but not engage these rogue threats and the good news is, the more practiced we become, the easier it gets.

Praying can help, but be very cautious about praying through the threats themselves as this can strengthen them and make them more real. Instead, pray that God would strengthen your resolve not to engage with these thoughts and turn our attention to worship rather than worry. Dealing with catastrophizing is hard work, but you can make progress. If you feel uncomfortable at first, you are doing it right! Try to push through the pain and uncertainty and you will find even greater success.