

Decatastrophizing – Stopping the Anxiety Cycle

Anxiety – How It Happens:

- 1) **“Ambiguous Stimuli”** – Something happens that is potentially upsetting, but is unclear in its meaning or impact. This becomes the “trigger experience.”
- 2) **“Catastrophizing”** – The individual responds to this situation by immediately focusing on the “worst case scenario” of what the trigger experience might mean, or might become.
- 3) **“Fight or Flight Mode”** – Envisioning this “catastrophe” (often as a detailed “movie”) sends messages from the brain to the body, alerting it to possible imminent danger. The body responds by going into “fight or flight” mode – faster breathing, accelerated heart rate, etc.
- 4) **Anxiety** - This launches the physical symptoms of anxiety – which then launch additional worry and distress, without the original “trigger experience” yet being resolved.

Turning It Around – How to Stop the Anxiety Response:

Step One: Generate A Menu Of Alternative Explanations.



Develop these in the order indicated – first, “worst-case” (since your anxiety has already given you that); second, “best-case” (make it as fun, light, humorous, and outlandishly happy as you can, to compensate for the heaviness of the “worst case”); last, “most likely” – think of as many realistically probable explanations as you can. Having the full “arc” of alternatives distracts you from sitting anxiously focused on the “disaster movie,” and prepares you better for the full range of possibilities. Often, this step alone will provide enough relief, without proceeding to the other two.

Step Two: Assess The Probability Of Each Scenario

If step one doesn’t give sufficient relief, proceed to this step. Assess the probability (% chance) of each scenario you identified. Most often, the “worst-case” and “best-case” scenarios will have fairly low probability (5% or less chance), while the most likely scenarios will have a higher probability (30% or higher.)

Step Three: Develop A Coping Strategy for the “Worst Case Scenario”

If your “worst case” scenario has a high probability rating (40% chance or more), then proceed to this step. “Just in case” that negative scenario occurs, what steps can you take to be better prepared for it? Once you have a clear coping strategy, the worst-case scenario is likely to be less terrifying. (This step is only needed in a minority of situations.)

Decatastrophizing Worksheet

Step One: Generate A Menu Of Alternative Explanations.



Step Two (If Needed): Assess The Probability Of Each Scenario

_____ % chance

Step Three (If Needed): Develop A Coping Strategy for the "Worst Case Scenario"