



Keep it in Perspective

As a caregiver, do you sometimes find it hard to keep things in perspective? Do you struggle with thinking the worst when something difficult happens while caring for your loved one and jump to the worst-case scenario? Do you blow things out of proportion? This is very common among caregivers. Our topic for today is catastrophizing. We will talk about what it is, why it is common among caregivers, the challenges it creates, and good solutions to cope with it.

Let's begin.

Catastrophizing is a common thought trap or cognitive distortion. Thought traps or cognitive distortions are automatic, irrational, biased and inaccurate thoughts. Catastrophizing is jumping to the worst case, unlikely scenario in a difficult situation, and can worsen stress and anxiety. Experts also call catastrophizing "magnifying" because a person makes a situation seem much worse than it is. A key component to this is thinking the worst without any reason or facts to back it up.

Let's talk about examples that may come up in your caregiving role. Your loved one gets ill, and you jump to "he or she is going to die" or "he or she is never going to recover". Or a family member was supposed to give you a break to get your hair done, and they cancel, you jump to "I'm never going to get a break". You may struggle with paying a bill on time and jump to "we're going to lose the house". Does any of this sound familiar as a caregiver? If so, you are not alone. As caregivers, we experience extreme stress, so we're more vulnerable to thought traps that can undermine our well-being. These negative thoughts are normal and common, and we all have them. They are not our fault. They can sneak up on us, and at times, we don't even notice them.

There are signs that signal we are about to get caught in the catastrophizing trap. It may look like general feelings of depression, anxiety or pessimism. You may experience racing thoughts that feel like a freight train you cannot control. Your anger or fear may start to feel overwhelming, and you may not believe you deserve good things. You might experience low self-esteem or feel like you don't have control over the situation. You may notice negative self-talk, or that you overthink a situation or event.

We are now going to focus on why caregivers are so prone to negative thinking and catastrophizing. Thought distortions in general, are common when someone is under stress or is in a difficult situation. Caregiving is an extremely difficult job, and you as caregivers, are often under a lot of stress.



Let's talk about the unique stressors that caregivers face. Many caregivers experience isolation. Due to the demands of caregiving and their loved one not being able to leave the house easily, they may not be able to get out and socialize with others.

You may experience financial hardship, due to not being able to work or work as much. Maybe you have mounting medical bills. This may cause stress and worry about how you are going to afford your bills or your basic needs.

The change in roles that often happens while caring for a loved one can also take a toll and cause stress. You may be a caregiver for your spouse, where you used to divide tasks and have an intimate relationship. Now you are focused on their care and completing the household tasks your loved one used to do. You may be caring for your parent, who used to support, guide, and care for you, and now you are caring for them.

Veterans can experience a variety of complex medical and mental health diagnoses. These conditions can be very difficult to navigate, and lead to negative thinking. For example, when a loved one has dementia, they are not able to process certain events or actions as you or I and they are more likely to lash out verbally or physically. People with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) may become irrational and have difficulty regulating their emotions. Individuals with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may display irritability and outbursts, and/or withdraw and not want to be around others. Due to these symptoms, caregivers of individuals with these diagnoses may be more prone to Catastrophizing. For example, if someone with dementia starts yelling or calling you names, you may think, "I'm the worst caregiver ever". If your loved one is isolating themselves due to PTSD, you may jump to thinking: "they don't love me anymore".

Many caregivers care for Veterans with chronic pain, creating unique challenges. People with chronic pain who catastrophize are more likely to have distress, increased pain, hopelessness, and depression. As a caregiver, it can be difficult seeing your loved one in pain, making it easier to panic or become anxious. When caregivers think and respond negatively, this makes Veterans more likely to have difficulty coping with their pain. Seeing a loved one in pain can be emotionally draining, and lead to catastrophizing, causing physical and emotional distress for the caregiver.

There are many ways that negative thinking can affect our mental health and wellbeing. Studies have shown as caregivers you are more prone to anxiety and depression than those who may not be in a caregiving role. Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all linked together, and when we blow things out of proportion, it can increase our anxiety and depression. It can also negatively affect how we think of ourselves. Conversely, anxiety and depression can lead to catastrophizing and other negative thoughts.



There are many negative ways anxiety and depression can take a toll on us, including our physical health. Anxiety and depression can lead to a weakened immune system, headaches, digestive issues, fatigue, muscle tension or pain, and many other medical problems. Depression and anxiety can also lead to sleep problems or weight changes.

Negative mood can lead to behaviors that are harmful to you, such as not caring for yourself and engaging in behaviors that can be detrimental to your health like smoking, drinking too much, or drug use. It can also lead to not going to doctor's appointments, or maybe not getting the exercise we need or eating right. This can lead to a variety of problems and further negative impacts on your health.

Thinking the worst can also impact relationships. For example, assuming that something your loved one said was a slight against you, when they did not mean it in a negative way. You may think that this means they don't care about you, rather than keeping what they said in perspective. Catastrophizing intensifies negative events, causing unnecessary panic and tension in relationships. Overreacting to minor situations can strain connections. When we catastrophize, we might become overly controlling to prevent perceived disasters. This can stifle autonomy and spontaneity that make relationships healthy. Minor issues are blown out of proportion, causing poor mental health and ineffective communication. When you as a caregiver catastrophize, this may lead to your needing reassurance from your Veteran, when they are needing your reassurance and support.

Negative thoughts and mood can also affect our relationships with other loved ones. You may find yourself isolating from others. You may find yourself not calling that friend or family member or accepting invitations to socialize. You may stop going to church, community organizations, or reaching out for the vital help you need. This can lead to a situation where your thoughts and mood decline even further.

The good news is this - you have the power to stop catastrophizing. When we can change these negative thought patterns, we can improve our mood and behavior towards ourselves and others.

We now want to talk about specific, realistic strategies that can help reduce catastrophizing when caregiving.

An effective tool in your keeping it in perspective toolbox is specific support through individual therapy. There are certain therapies that have been shown by research to stop negative thinking and improve mood. One evidenced based therapy that is used is called cognitive behavioral therapy. This is a type of therapy or treatment that helps people learn how to identify and change destructive or harmful thought patterns. Many



therapists are trained in this type of treatment. Individual counseling with a therapist trained in CBT can be a powerful tool to stop catastrophizing.

One strategy that comes from cognitive behavioral therapy, which can help you to stop thinking the worst is a thought record. Recognizing the catastrophizing thought is an important step in stopping getting caught in a negative spiral. When you are aware of and recognize the negative thought, you are better equipped to deal with and stop thinking the worst.

Let's review the five steps for developing a thought record.

Number one - Write down the situation. For example, my Veteran is experiencing unusual pain.

Number two - Write down the thoughts you have. For example, there must be something seriously wrong.

Number three - Write down the emotions you feel. For example, scared.

Number four - Write down your behaviors. For example, I can't concentrate on anything and keep zoning out.

Number five – Write down an alternate positive thought. For example, once I contact the doctor, they will know what to do and how to help.

Let's get some practice with this to get used to this skill. Take a moment to find pen and paper or pull up a notepad on your tablet or cell phone. [Pause]

Think about a situation that was difficult. [Pause] For example, my partner was triggered, and we had to leave our date night at the restaurant, or my loved one yelled at me when I was trying to help. [Pause]

Let's go through these five steps now.

Number one - Write down the situation or event that occurred. [Pause]

Number two - Write down the thoughts you had. [Pause]

Number three - Write down the emotions you felt. [Pause]

Number four - Write down what you did. [Pause]

Number five – Write down an alternate positive thought you could have had about the situation. [Pause]



You can see how taking these steps and reframing how you think about a situation, can have a more positive impact on how you see yourself as a caregiver.

Catastrophizing is generated by fear which impacts our nervous system. Visualization is an effective relaxation technique that allows you to take a mental vacation to reduce stress, decrease anxiety, and experience full body relaxation. Today we will practice a guided visualization relaxation script that will guide you to imagine relaxing in a peaceful meadow.

Take a moment to relax your body. Get comfortable. Notice how your body feels and make some slight adjustments to increase your comfort. Take a deep breath in. Hold it... and breathe out, releasing tension.

Breathe in again, and as you exhale, allow your body to relax slightly.

Continue to breathe slowly...deeply.

As you visualize the following scene, let your body and mind become more and more relaxed with each moment.

Imagine yourself walking outdoors.

You are walking through the trees...small aspens, their leaves moving in a slight breeze.

The sun shines down warmly.

You walk toward a clearing in the trees. As you come closer to the clearing, you see that it is a meadow.

You walk out of the trees, into the meadow. Tall green grass blows gently...

You are probably feeling a bit tired...

It would be so nice to sit down in the grass.

Walk further into the meadow now...looking around...

Imagine the meadow in your mind's eye...what does the meadow look like?

Find a place to sit. You might want to sit or lie down in the grass...perhaps you have a blanket with you that you can unroll over the soft grass and lie down.

Feel the breeze caress your skin as you sit or lie down in the sun.

It is a pleasant day...warm, but not hot...quiet and peaceful.



Notice the sights around you. The grass, whispering...see the mix of meadow grasses, clover, wildflowers around you.

Watch a small ladybug climb a blade of grass. Climbing up toward the top, pausing for a moment, and then flying away.

Imagine closing your eyes and listening to the sounds of the meadow. Hear birds singing...the breeze rustling the grass softly...

Feel the sun on your face. Imagine turning your face up toward the sky, eyes closed, enjoying the warmth of the sun.

Smell the grass...the wildflowers...the smell of the sun on the earth...

Look around again to see the sights around you. Notice how the ground follows gentle contours of hills. See the blue sky above you...a few wispy clouds drifting slowly by.

See the trees at the edge of the meadow.

The meadow is lush and green, a haven for birds and animals. As you watch, a deer peers out through the trees, and emerges to graze at the edge of the meadow.

The deer raises its head to look at you, sniffing the breeze, and then turns, disappearing silently into the trees.

Rest and luxuriate in this peaceful, beautiful meadow. Notice the sights, sounds, and smells around you. Feel the soft grass beneath you, the sun and breeze on your skin. Imagine all the details of this place.

(pause)

Now it is time to leave the meadow and return to the present. Notice your surroundings. Feel the surface beneath you. Hear the sounds around you. Open your eyes to look around, re-orienting to the present.

Take a moment to stretch your muscles and allow your body to reawaken.

When you are ready, return to your usual activities, keeping with you a feeling of peace and calm.

Now that we have practiced that strategy, another way to stop thinking the worst, is to challenge these thoughts. There are a couple of ways to do this. One is called compassionate cognitive restructuring. This is simply looking at the negative thought through a caring lens. You can do this by thinking about what you would say to a loved one in a similar situation, or what a loved one would say to you, to assist thinking in a



more caring and compassionate way towards yourself. Would you have such negative and harmful thoughts about a loved one in a similar situation? Most likely not! You should be as compassionate to yourself as you are to the people you love the most.

To curb your negative thinking, you can also put your catastrophizing thought “on trial”. This is where you use a metaphor of a court room and you put your negative thought “on trial”. You take your thought and look at the “defense” of the thought and list reasons the thought might be true, then act as the prosecutor where you argue that your catastrophizing thought is false, and list all of the reasons against the thought. This can help you realize there is no evidence that your negative thought is true, to help not thinking the worst.

An additional tip to stop catastrophizing is to change what you are doing to “interrupt” the negative thoughts. Call a friend, take a walk, do some deep breathing, listen to music that calms you or makes you feel good, do an activity you enjoy, like crafts or gardening. Doing activities that are positive and that you enjoy can help you shift away from jumping to the worst. This can also improve your mood, which can also stop these negative thoughts.

Another strategy to help keeping things in perspective is to learn to sit with the discomfort. When you have a catastrophizing thought, stop and remind yourself it is temporary, in order to disconnect the thought-behavior connection. Try reciting this mantra: “I am having an irrational thought, and I do not need to act on it.”

Positive affirmations are another effective way to stop catastrophizing. This can enable you to feel more confident and capable of handling a difficult situation and not thinking the worst. Examples of positive affirmations are, “I have handled difficult situations before effectively”, “I am a capable caregiver”, or “everything is absolutely OK right now”.

Another effective tool to cease the repetitive, catastrophic thoughts you may have is thought stopping. Thought stopping is saying aloud or in your head, “Stop!” or “No more!” These words can break the stream of thoughts and help you change the course of your thinking.

A great strategy of overcoming thinking the worst is thinking and concentrating on a positive or less negative outcome. For example, instead of thinking “I will never get a break” when scheduled help falls through, thinking “I have 30 minutes during my loved ones naptime, where I can take a short walk”.

Mindfulness is learning to settle and be grounded in the present moment, and can ease a stressful experience. Mindfulness can be a powerful tool in your keep it in perspective



toolbox. Some specific mindfulness activities include placing your hand on your heart, holding your own hand, massage, meditation, or yoga. Tapping on your forehead, body scanning, grounding, or intentional breathing can also keep you in the current moment and help positive thinking. Some specific mindfulness exercises can be found on the VA app Mindfulness Coach. We want to teach you a brief mindfulness exercise now.

Please find a relaxed, comfortable position. You could be seated on a chair or on the floor on a cushion. Try to keep your back upright, but not too tight. Hands resting wherever they're comfortable. Tongue on the roof of your mouth or wherever it's comfortable.

Notice and invite your body to relax. Let yourself relax and become curious about your body seated here—the sensations it experiences, the touch, the connection with the floor or the chair. Do your best to relax any areas of tightness or tension. Breathe.

Tune into the rhythm of your breath. You can feel the natural flow of breath—in, out. You don't need to do anything to your breath. Not long, not short, but natural. Notice where you feel your breath in your body. It might be in your abdomen. It may be in your chest or throat or in your nostrils. See if you can feel the sensations of breath, one breath at a time. You might even notice the temperature of the air change, on the inhale feeling cool, while the exhale might feel warm. When one breath ends, the next breath begins. If you are not able to notice the breath in all areas of the body, that is OK. We are more connected to certain areas of the body than others, at different times of the day.

Now as you do this, you might notice that your mind may start to wander. You may start thinking about other things. If this happens, it is not a problem. It's very natural. Try to notice that your mind has wandered. You can say "thinking" or "wandering" in your head softly. And then gently redirect your attention right back to the breathing.

For a few moments, Notice your breath, in silence. From time to time, you'll get lost in thought, then return to your breath.

Once again notice your body, your whole body, seated here. Let yourself relax even more deeply and then, if you like, please offer yourself some appreciation for doing this practice today. Slowly allow yourself to come back to the present moment.

Like any mindfulness activity, practice is key to be most effective. If you want, practice this exercise throughout the week, or whenever you feel overwhelmed.

Self-care and taking time for yourself can also assist you in avoiding catastrophizing and negative thinking in general. Catastrophic thoughts are more likely to take over



when experiencing fatigue or stress. Getting enough rest, eating nutritious meals, and engaging in stress-relieving techniques, such as exercise and journaling, can all help you feel better. We know that this is easier said than done! Take that bath. Listen to that music that relaxes you. Drink that cup of tea. Reach out to someone that you enjoy talking to. Reach for support that you need. Meditate or do that craft you enjoy. Take a moment to take a deep breath.

Today, we've talked about catastrophizing, how it affects caregivers, and specific strategies to increase positive thinking. Remember, caregiving is an extremely hard job, so it is normal to struggle at times. We hope that this presentation has given you some helpful tools to explore ways to care for yourself and think and feel more positively. You matter!