

Why Do I Always Assume the Worst?

Sometimes it doesn't take very much.

You send a text and don't get a reply.

Someone gives you a funny look.

Your manager hasn't given you any feedback about the work you submitted.

You've had a bad day. Or a bad week. Maybe lately it feels as though one difficult thing has followed another.

And before you know it, your mind has decided what all of this means.

They're upset with me.

I've done something wrong.

Something bad is going to happen.

Tomorrow will probably be just as bad.

Why did I think things would be different this time?

When this happens often enough, you might begin describing yourself as a pessimist. You might wonder why you always have to make everything worse than it is or why everyone else seems able to remain positive when you can't. But assuming the worst isn't necessarily about being a negative person.

Sometimes, **expecting the worst feels safer than allowing ourselves to hope for something better.**

When we don't know, our minds fill in the gaps

Uncertainty can be incredibly uncomfortable.

Imagine you've sent an important email at work and heard nothing back. There are countless explanations for the silence.

The person may be busy. They may not have read it yet. They might be waiting for more information before replying. They may have read it, thought it was absolutely fine and moved on to something else. But when we're already anxious or unsure of ourselves, those aren't always the explanations our minds reach for first.

Instead:

They haven't replied because it wasn't what they wanted.

I must have done it wrong.

They're disappointed in me.

Nothing has actually been confirmed. But our mind has taken the information it does have — **silence** — and filled in everything it doesn't. And suddenly we're responding emotionally to a story that may or may not be true.

What if everything really has been going wrong?

Sometimes assuming the worst doesn't come out of nowhere.

Perhaps you've had several disappointments recently. Work has been relentless. Bad news seems to keep arriving. Something you hoped would work out hasn't. You're exhausted and you already know the next few weeks are going to be demanding.

When you're in the middle of that, being told to “look on the bright side” can feel incredibly unhelpful.

Sometimes you genuinely can't see through the fog. If today was difficult, why wouldn't tomorrow be? If this week has been awful, why would next week suddenly be better? When enough difficult things happen close together, they can begin to feel less like individual experiences and more like evidence:

This is just how things are for me.

The difficult week becomes a difficult month before the month has even happened.

The past can enter the present very quickly

Our expectations don't develop in isolation.

If you've experienced rejection before, another possibility of rejection can feel particularly threatening. If you've been criticised, a small piece of feedback might carry much more weight. If you've taken a chance before and been disappointed, putting yourself out there again can feel dangerous.

It can happen remarkably quickly. A delayed response, a particular expression or a change in someone's tone can bring an old feeling straight back.

Here we go again.

I knew this would happen.

That's what I get for putting myself out there.

I failed before. I'll fail again.

I'm not good enough.

One difficult experience can become evidence for a future that hasn't happened yet.

The current situation may be different. The people may be different. You may be different. But the feeling is familiar. And sometimes familiarity is enough for our defences to come straight back up.

Assuming the worst can feel like protection

There can be an understandable logic underneath expecting disappointment. If I expect the worst now, perhaps I can prepare myself for it. If I don't get my hopes up, perhaps I won't be as disappointed.

If I assume I've been rejected, I can begin dealing with it before somebody actually tells me. In that sense, assuming the worst can become a way of trying to get ahead of the pain.

A defence mechanism.

It can give us an illusion of control over something we don't yet know. The difficulty is that we may begin experiencing the disappointment **before we know whether there is anything to be disappointed about.**

We protect ourselves from a future possibility by bringing some of its pain into the present.

Your body may believe the story too

These thoughts don't necessarily stay in our heads. Your body can begin responding as though the thing you're imagining has already happened.

You might feel tense or anxious.

Your stomach feels sick. You become nauseated or dizzy. You feel completely exhausted.

For some people, the response is to shut down. You become quiet. Withdrawn. Unresponsive. You retreat into your own head and replay the situation again and again.

You might Google for answers or search for reassurance. You might avoid the situation completely. Or you become defensive and find it difficult to hear what other people are telling you because your mind is already preparing for what it believes is coming.

The possibility has started to feel like a fact.

Does assuming the worst change what we do next?

This is where it can become particularly difficult. Imagine you've decided someone is angry with you because they haven't replied.

You withdraw.

Perhaps you become defensive when they eventually contact you. Maybe you don't answer at all. Or you read their next message looking for evidence that confirms what you've already decided. The story in our head can begin influencing the way we respond to the real situation.

Sometimes we become so focused on protecting ourselves from what *might* happen that we don't leave much room to discover what actually is happening.

What do we actually know?

When someone is expecting the worst, I don't think it's particularly helpful to simply tell them they're overreacting. Their reaction usually makes sense somewhere. Instead, we can become curious about it.

How often does this happen?

When was the last time you felt this way?

Does it happen more when you're already stressed?

Has something happened before that makes this particular situation feel threatening?

And perhaps importantly:

How often has what you feared actually come true?

Not *could it happen?*

Of course it could.

But **has** it happened every time?

Does one bad experience change what you expect from the next one?

Sometimes separating **what we know** from **what we're predicting** gives us just enough room to see that they aren't necessarily the same thing.

What if the worst does happen?

This is perhaps the harder part. We can't reassure ourselves that nothing bad will ever happen. Sometimes the email does contain disappointing news. Sometimes somebody is upset with us. Sometimes we don't get the job, the relationship ends, the plan falls apart or something happens that we desperately hoped wouldn't.

But spending hours, days or weeks preparing ourselves emotionally for the worst doesn't necessarily make that experience easier when it arrives. It may simply mean we've suffered through it once in our imagination before we've had to face it in reality. There is another possibility we often overlook when we're trying desperately to predict what will happen:

If something difficult does happen, I will deal with it then.

That doesn't mean it won't hurt. It doesn't mean you'll immediately know what to do. It means recognising that you've got through difficult things before, and you don't need to experience the next one before it has even happened.

Final Thoughts

If you regularly assume the worst, perhaps you don't need to criticise yourself for being negative or tell yourself to "think positively." It may be more helpful to wonder what your mind is trying to protect you from.

Is this situation genuinely telling you something is wrong? Or has uncertainty left a gap that your mind has filled with a familiar story?

Has something from the past taught you to expect disappointment?

Are you trying to get ahead of something painful so it can't catch you by surprise?

You don't have to convince yourself that everything is going to be fine. Sometimes a more realistic place to land is simply:

I don't know what's going to happen yet.

And if the worst does happen, you can respond to what is actually happening — rather than exhausting your mind and body responding to every version of what might.

 **Therapist's Reflection:** When someone tells me they always expect the worst, I'm less interested in telling them that they're overreacting and more interested in understanding why this particular situation feels so threatening.

I might ask: *Has something happened to make you feel this way? When was the last time you felt like this? Is this something that happens regularly or does it become stronger when you're already under stress?*

Sometimes what looks like pessimism makes much more sense when we understand what came before it. I also think it's worth asking ourselves what all that anticipation is actually giving us.

If we spend days preparing for something terrible that never happens, we've asked our minds and bodies to carry an enormous amount of stress unnecessarily.

And if the thing we're afraid of does happen, we will have to deal with it then. Perhaps we don't need to practise the pain in advance.

We can allow ourselves not to know — and trust that if something difficult does come, we'll find our way through it when it does.

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