

Quality #2 Goals and Expectations

Imagined Catastrophe:

When we fantasize it is inevitable that we will experience the polar opposite, imagined catastrophe. When life shows up differently from our fantasy, and it always does, we can engage in obsessive worrying, endlessly thinking about every worse-case scenario known to humankind - plus a few. Og calls it, "Tormenting myself over events that may never come to pass."

Again, systemic thoughts are dualistic - no gray, no spectrum or gradation. When an expectation, a concrete condition for happiness, is threatened, a systemic thought will automatically go from "everything is perfect" to "everything is horrible" - worse case scenarios. This is called catastrophizing or pessimistic thinking. Systemic thoughts have no other mathematical choice.

To further complicate the dualistic nature of a systemic thought, the very real physiological reactions that are simultaneously occurring at the cellular level in the body serve only as a confirmation that our worst fears are real. These molecule driven emotions of anxiety, fearfulness, and stress can be misinterpreted by our intuition. As a result we risk the possibility of reading into these feelings much more than is actually happening and then acting upon this "false intuition."

If we get caught in this tsunami of emotions, we can turn a molehill into a mountain in a moment. Have you ever been given a small piece of information (a glance, smile, frown, phone call, email, comment, gossip) and from that small piece of information written a feature film script about what it "really" means, what is "really"

happening? If so, have you ever reacted based on this “false intuitive feeling” believing it was accurate? How often have you discovered that it was not as it appeared (not as good, not as serious)? Do you ever find yourself apologizing for these reactions?

An unknown author suggests that the word FEAR is an acronym – F.E.A.R. It stands for false evidence appearing real. The false evidence is the cortisol and fear dendrites that are autonomically released when our expectations are challenged. This false evidence heightens our negative or pessimistic thoughts driving additional releases of these “molecules of emotion.” This cycle of having an expectation threatened by tangible reality, the release of molecules, and the resultant emotions and feelings of anxiety can seem very real. The basis for these escalating negative thoughts that create this release, is not real.

Neuroscientists suggest that this could be one of the most difficult times to be conscious and aware of people and the complexity of situations. The metabolic energy has been robbed from the area of the brain that supports higher levels of consciousness. Our hippocampus, our memory center, has been locked down or severely blunted. Our body feels tense and anxious. We have been prepared for war. Have you ever experienced this level of fear? Have you ever over-reacted only to regret it later? Have you ever wounded anyone when this occurs? What price are you paying for this often pervasive and potentially chronic and destructive seed of fantasy?

It’s 5 PM on a Friday. You get one of “those emails” or voice messages that cause a lightning bolt of anxiety and fear to wash over you. Do you know the feeling? You want to find out what is going on and

attempt to connect with the person but discover that he or she has left for the weekend and will not be available until 8 AM on Monday? What could it be? Why do they seem so angry or accusatory?

Tell me about your weekend.

How emotionally available will you be for family and friends? How many negative scenarios will you play out over the next 60 hours? Are you ever tempted to engage in a manhunt in an effort to track down the person and get to the bottom of this challenge? Ever spent a weekend worrying, endlessly playing out every possible scenario? How often are these imagined outcomes negative? How often do worse case scenarios actually play out in the tangible world?

It's 8 AM Monday morning. You call and confront your accuser only to discover that you misread or misunderstood the message. What happens when it all turns out okay? Take a big deep breath and exhale . . . shuuuu. Feels good, huh?

Have you ever had a worse-case scenario actually happen? I have. It only takes one to confirm the need for this exercise of endlessly preparing for every possible worse-case scenario. However, I have discovered that this exhausting and energy depleting process had less to do with preparation and more to do with protection. My worse-case event that actually occurred was painful. How was yours? Did that "right cross" knock you off your feet like mine did me? Did it hurt so bad that it left you determined to be prepared to block any blow and from any direction? A lot of wasted time!

Tongue in cheek, catastrophizing does seem to be effective. Paraphrasing Mark Twain and quoting my father, "Don't tell me worrying doesn't work. Everything I worry about never happens."

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Oddly, this exercise of entertaining worse-case scenarios accompanied by cortisol releases, followed by a deep sense of relief fueled by epinephrine or dopamine can also be addicting to a pessimistic thinker – masochistic but nonetheless addicting. The process in general can be deadly.

Dr. Don Kennedy, a family physician and one of our coaches, reports that the majority of health challenges being faced by his geriatric patients can be traced back to a lifetime of obsessive worrying – catastrophizing - and the resultant chronic release of cortisol. Studies support his findings. Dan Goleman, in his seminal work, *Social Intelligence*, reports that chronic doses of cortisol contribute to health challenges such as immune deficiency disease, hypertension, and exacerbation of diabetes.

When we are in this “war ready” emotional state, we can say and do things that we might later regret. It is very difficult to be aware of and be sensitive to the needs of others when we are experiencing these chemical reactions. I can still remember sitting in my office with a good friend and new coaching client. We were deep into the debrief of his Assessment Report. It was apparent from the measurements and our conversation that his systemic thoughts engaged regularly in imagined catastrophe. I knew the questions to ask. I used to have the same measurement in my assessment. I concluded with this question, “What would your life be like if you consciously stopped doing this?” His response was revealing, “I would cease to exist.” I shared that when I made the conscious decision to change this thought process and stop fantasizing and experiencing the destructive seeds of fantasy, imagined

catastrophe, I found at least three extra productive hours in the day. I encouraged him to do likewise. How many hours might you find?