CATASTROPHIC THINKING

In my last newsletter, I wrote about one form of thinking (i.e., Polarized Thinking) common to many perfectionists. This issue describes another pattern of thinking that affects perfectionists: Catastrophic Thinking.

In some ways, it seems related to polarized thinking. It is also a view of the world in extremes. Only now, instead of evaluating outcomes, it relates to projected negative consequences. At some level (perhaps not fully conscious), there’s a belief that one mistake can have catastrophic consequences: I’ll be fired, lose my family, become gravely ill.

Let’s start with the last one: warding off serious illness. In an attempt to do that, a perfectionist may engage in any or all of the following activities related to health and fitness: maintain a rigid regimen of eating only certain types of foods (never wavering); take a variety of dietary supplements (e.g., vitamins, minerals, amino acids, herbs); establish a rigorous exercise routine (e.g., running, resistance training, and yoga); meditate; get 8 hours of sleep per night; drink 10 glasses of water/day; submit to all recommended medical exams and tests. The underlying belief is that if I do everything right, I’ll be healthy and live a long life. In reality, the steps taken to ensure health do make a difference. But they are no guarantee. Case in point: Jim Fixx, considered one of the people who started the fitness revolution, took up running based on his belief that physical exercise considerably increased the average human being’s life expectancy. He was 52 when he died of a heart attack suffered while running.

In fact, being perfect can’t really ensure protection from any of the undesired outcomes because there are always some factors beyond the person’s control. A prime example is what’s been happening in the current economy. People who did excellent jobs were RIF’d (otherwise known as downsized or laid off) despite their perfect performance. The reason was financial problems with the company. Their actions could not protect them.

Pick one area of your life: work, family, friends, education, sports, etc.

1. What do you believe will happen if you aren’t perfect in that part of your life?
   • Ask yourself the question 15 times in succession and jot down the answers
   • (If you have someone with whom you feel very comfortable, a particularly powerful approach to this question would be to have that person ask you this question 15 times in rapid succession)

2. What’s the likelihood of that being true?

3. What’s a more realistic expectation of outcome?

4. Think back to one or two situations in the past where you were not perfect. What did you think would happen? What actually happened?

5. What have you learned about consequences of being less than perfect?