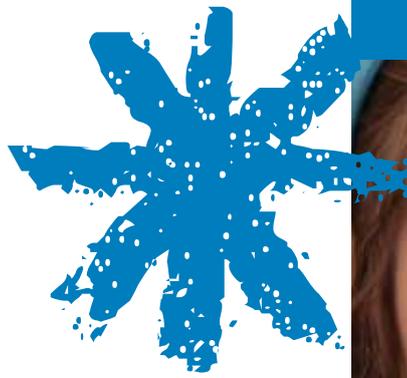


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insights



Help kids change their perspective when things go wrong

By Michael Grose

Parents can help catastrophisers learn to change their perspective when things go wrong.

It's natural when things go wrong to think that life will never be the same again. I recall as a teenager doing poorer than expected in my end of school exams, and missing the tertiary course I had set for myself. At the time it was such a catastrophe. I thought that there was no point taking another course – naturally, I would hate it. Of course, I undertook a teaching course, which I really enjoyed and I didn't look back.

Breaking up with a friend, losing close sports events and being on the receiving end of teasing can at the time seem like events from which we will never recover.

Catastrophising (jumping immediately to the worst possible scenario) only exaggerates kids' worries and makes them feel even more anxious. It always helps to keep your sense of proportion, but it's not easy when emotions run high. We all exaggerate our problems from time to time, particularly, when we are under stress. It takes a cool customer to moderate their thinking the whole time, but some kids are prone to jumping to the worst-case scenario, even when the events are quite minor.

If your child is a serial catastrophiser, always seeing the worst case in a

negative situation, try to change their thinking so they learn to keep things in perspective. Ask them the following questions to challenge your child's catastrophic thinking:

'What's the most likely scenario?'

Sometimes it's useful to introduce a dose of old-fashioned rational thinking for those kids who always assume the worst will happen to them. 'Yep, you could break your leg if you go skiing. But the odds are that you won't.'

'You may be right, but does it really matter?' One way to help hard-core catastrophisers is to admit that they could be right, but then ask them to imagine that the worst possible scenario actually happens. Then challenge them to understand that even the worst possible scenario is not so bad after all. This is the type of reality check many kids need.

'Where does this fit on the disaster meter?'

Catastrophisers tie themselves in a knot about relatively insignificant things. Okay, making a fool out of themselves when they give a talk at school may not be insignificant to kids, but there are plenty of worse things that could happen. Help them get some perspective by giving their worry a score out of ten on how important the issue really is.

'Is that helpful thinking?'

Sometimes kids' thinking is so out of whack with reality that they become anxious about minor things. Thinking things such as, 'Everyone must like me,' 'I must never make a mistake' and 'Bad things always happen to me' are extreme and need to be replaced by more moderate, realistic thoughts, such as, 'It would be nice if everyone liked me but not everyone will. It's important to have some good friends.'

When children experience hardships it is helpful if parents and teachers can assist them to process what happened to them. Children are faulty observers and often have difficulty seeing the full picture particularly when they are so close to the situation. Help your child see the full picture and in doing so they may realise that things may not be as bad as they seem.

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