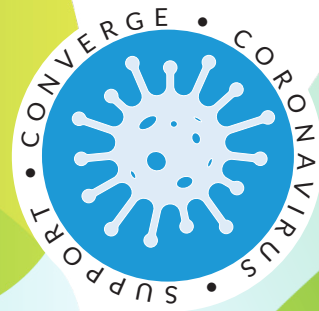
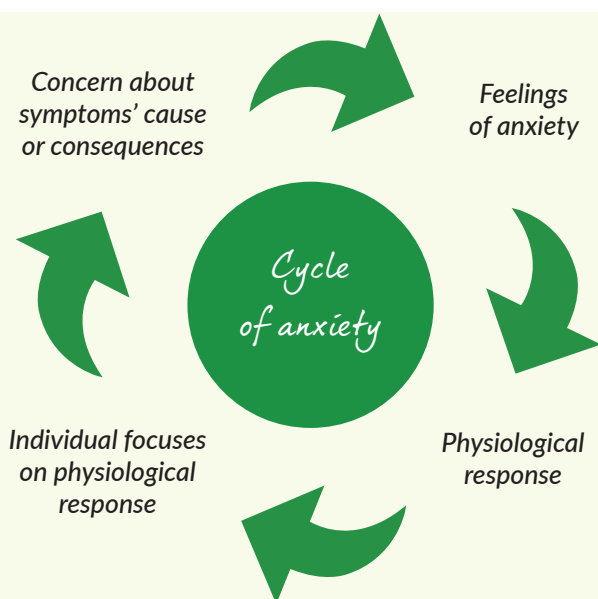


# ANTICIPATORY ANXIETY AND CATASTROPHISING

## AND WHY WE ARE MORE PREDISPOSED TO BOTH RIGHT NOW



*Anticipatory anxiety occurs when people experience increased anxiety and stress when they think about an event they believe will happen in the future. A useful working definition is “overestimating the likelihood of an event to occur, and underestimating your ability to cope when it does”. Anxiety like this may occur in response to large events such as giving a speech at your best friend’s wedding or dealing with the major uncertainty and disruption caused by Coronavirus (COVID-19) - which will be explored below. For some people, it’s not just the big life events: it can also be present for people prior to minor, everyday activities such as driving to work, parking your car, or having conversations with work colleagues. While anticipatory anxiety is not a distinct mental health condition in itself, it can be part of a more significant mental health problem. For now, let’s focus on the cycle of anxiety that gives rise to anticipatory anxiety as many healthy, well and balanced individuals are feeling overwhelmed with the scale of COVID-19 and all the unknowns that come with it.*



The **cycle of anxiety** is well understood but colleagues, friends and particularly family don’t necessarily use this language to describe escalating anxiety. More likely, they will experience it as being more dramatic. However, this is a more common form of anxiety that you might know as catastrophising. We’ve all heard it: friends and family are more likely to say... “stop being so dramatic” or “you’re just being a drama queen”. It’s got a kind of over-the-top-ness to it that others may mock, but for many, this is a very real anxiety, one over which you may have limited control.

### NORMAL VERSUS PROBLEMATIC ANTICIPATORY ANXIETY

An endless number of life experiences cause normal anticipatory anxiety. Many times we experience anxiety in anticipation of doing something new or before we complete a major task or go through an upcoming life event.

You might feel anticipatory anxiety before a hosting Christmas lunch, a first date, a plane flight, a final exam, a job interview, or change in career. It’s normal to feel a bit scared or anxious before these big life events. Problematic anticipatory anxiety goes beyond the limits of what people normally experience with new or major life events.

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# ANTICIPATORY ANXIETY AND CATASTROPHISING

It leads to major catastrophising to the point that you struggle to function normally or perform certain aspects of your work role or life. This is because the anticipation, or the way you visualise a future event is focused on the potential of being completely overwhelmed with panic to the point that you can't function. In short, it's a vicious and unhelpful cycle.

## COVID-19 AND WHY ANTICIPATORY ANXIETY IS MORE PREVALENT NOW

As we have already explored, anticipatory anxiety and how it is closely associated with the way you think. Right now, there is arguably a global anxiety, a palpable worry that many people are experiencing in relation to the spread of COVID-19.

**Why is it so much worse right now?** This is because so many aspects of it are new to us and remain untested and deeply uncertain. In fact, there is no lived-experience of a global pandemic in any Australian's lifetime. Even centenarians were too young to remember the Spanish Flu almost 100 years ago. The impact of the Spanish Flu however echoes through families to this day. If we had experienced one before and got through it, we would have a sense of what to expect, you eventually get through it and life returns to normal. Right now though, many of us are unsure of the impact on us personally and what normal might look like on the other side.



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All of this fuels anticipatory anxiety. Much of this anxiety is arguably rational and an adapted response that we absolutely need right now, but sometimes, it's not. It's more than the normal response of processing complex uncertain realities. It's more serious, more disabling and more dangerous to our mental health and wellbeing. That's where we might need professional help. Your EAP may be a great resource. Speak with a mental health expert who can help put things in perspective and give you practical tools to challenge the fear-cycle that is starting to impact your life in negative and unhelpful ways.

## LET'S GET PRACTICAL - A WAY TO TACKLE CATASTROPHISING

It's important for a person who has a tendency to catastrophise or experience anticipatory anxiety to be able to rationalise their expectations with evidence they know to be true. Sometimes they can do this themselves. Sometimes they need help to sort out their thinking patterns and triggers. A useful skill to tackle catastrophic thinking is to challenge it: challenge your thoughts with the most likely outcome based on the evidence. Try mapping out your catastrophic thinking in relation to COVID-19 so you can deal with it more objectively, and see it for what it is, rather than what you're holding in your head and ruminating on. Finally, remember even those who do experience anticipatory anxiety cope better than they think they will when something bad happens and they have to deal with it.

*"Someone asked me, 'Aren't you worried about the state of the world?' I allowed myself to breathe and then I said, 'What is most important is not to allow your anxiety about what happens in the world to fill your heart. If your heart is filled with anxiety, you will get sick, and you will not be able to help.'"*

~ Thich Nhat Hahn

# LET'S GET PRACTICAL – A WAY TO TACKLE CATASTROPHISING

Steps to work through	What's your example or self-score?	Now think of a more optimistic alternative
What are you most worried about?		
How worried are you about it (0-10 scale)?		
What triggered this worry?		
What is the worst possible outcome that could happen?		
What evidence do you have to justify being so worried about this negative outcome?		
What evidence do you have against being so worried about this negative outcome?		
Being as logical as possible, what is the likely outcome?		
How worried would you be if that was the outcome (0-10 scale)?		

Remember, if this is all too much, you can do this with one of Converge's mental health experts to guide you along the way.

To access the EAP services, simply call **1300 OUR EAP (1300 687 327)** to make a time to speak with one of our team.

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