

# Come to your terms

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Once, a friend of mine decided to make a drastic career change by teaching themselves a bunch of new skills from scratch, (with occasional assistance from me). They ran into occasional difficulties along the way, one of them being that they could not consider the possibility of failure without feeling fear.

The possibility of failing — of investing months in the effort, with nothing to show for it, and then having nowhere left to turn — weighed heavily on them. It wore them down, it caused great stress, it induced panic attacks. Sometimes, they were incapacitated to the point that they could hardly think.

This wasn't completely unreasonable: they had no safety net and no margin for error, and they had good reasons to fear for their personal safety in the event of failure. The problem was not that their fears were irrational. The problem was that they *couldn't think them*.

I encouraged them to try facing their fears, and they did, but they found that coming to terms with the worst was impossible. They buckled, rather than buckling down. So consider that a content note: the exercise I describe in this post may not be possible or helpful for you.

But it has been very helpful for me, and I continue to think that if my friend had been able to truly come to terms with the worst case scenario they had in mind, to imagine it in detail and accept it as a possibility, then they would have had a much easier time managing that stress.

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So here's my advice: Think the unthinkable. Consider that which is painful to consider. Figure out what, exactly, is at stake. Weigh the consequences. Come to terms with them.

I'm *not* suggesting that you convince yourself the worst case actually wouldn't be that bad. I'm *not* suggesting that you tell yourself a story about how you could handle the worst. I'm saying, *come to terms with what could happen*. Imagine the worst case, in detail; learn to weigh it on your scales; accept that if you fail things could go very poorly; and then maybe those bad outcomes will loosen their grip on you.

If you ever notice yourself following the same pattern as my friend — if you ever notice an outcome *so terrible that you can't even consider it without panicking*, then I suggest that you pause, take a deep breath, and consider that outcome.

Visualize it in full detail. Don't need to excuse it. Don't tell yourself it wouldn't be your fault. Don't tell yourself it would be fine. Don't make up a story about how you'd handle it successfully. Just *imagine the worst*.

People close to you might get hurt. You could die. Lots of people could die. If bad outcomes are in the possibility space, internalize that *now*. Come to terms with that terrible fact as soon as you can. You want to get into a mental state where if the bad outcome comes to pass, you will only nod your head and say "I knew this card was in the deck, and I knew the odds, and I would make the same bets again, given the same opportunities." If you need to panic, panic once and get it over with. Otherwise, fear will strike again every time the bad outcome moves a millimeter closer, and that fear may debilitate you or incapacitate you at a crucial moment.

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It's the thoughts you can't think that control you most, and it's the outcomes you can't consider that weigh heaviest on your scales.

An outcome that you can't consider without panicking — failing a class, crashing a car, destroying the family business — weighs infinitely heavily in your considerations. You can't even *think in the direction* of allowing the bad thing to happen, without encountering a cloying fear that steers your thoughts away. It is as if the bad outcome has infinite weight on your scales. Your thoughts become censored; you become unable to rationally weigh the risks and gambles.

Once you've fully considered the terrible outcome, its weight on your scales becomes finite. It may remain heavy, it may be the overriding concern in your life, it may still dominate your actions. But once you've weighed the outcome, it can only dominate your actions if you decide that that's rational, after weighing the possibilities and tradeoffs.

And maybe, after seriously considering the terrible outcome, it will *stop* dominating your actions. Maybe it will seem less terrifying once you drag it into the light. Maybe it will seem more manageable after you consider how you'd *actually* manage it. Maybe you'll notice that the outcome wasn't as terrifying as it seemed at a distance.

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In my line of work, I occasionally find myself in conversations with powerful people in situations where the outcome of the conversation has some small chance of dramatically affecting the future of humanity and all earth-originating life. The first time I found myself in one of these conversations, I was fairly shaken afterwards.

During the conversation, there was a sensation not unlike the one I got as a young driver on the interstate, realizing that I could, with a trivial twist of my hands, steer the car into oncoming traffic. After the conversation, there was a fear that had a lingering effect on my thoughts. I was jumpier. My actions were less considered. I was flustered.

A friend of mine (who had been through this before) noticed, and asked me whether I'd ever really come to terms with the fact that I just might set into motion a chain of events that leads to the end of the world.

I said no.

But, amusingly enough, I *had* spent time coming to terms with the fact that I might ruin my *own* life, and die old and bitter and unaccomplished.

I remember *that* ritual quite well: I was 18 at the time, and I had (a few years prior) decided to dedicate my life to changing the world in a big way. I was aware of the odds stacked against me, and I was aware of the success rates, and I was fully aware of the fact that, in all likelihood, I was going to fail, and my ideas were going to prove defunct, and my plans were never going to come to fruition.

I imagined that I could well end up a bitter old man, bemoaning plans that should have worked, to people who only scoffed. Now, I also planned *not* to become that bitter old man — but in those days, I wasn't yet sure how much control I'd gain over my own mind, and I saw lots of bitter old men around me. I was wary that my plans to avoid bitterness would *also* fail, and I'd become bitter and old despite my best efforts.

As I attempted to get a few different schemes started, and I noticed myself holding back a part of myself, in case my

plan was just too crazy, in case I would be too harshly judged for trying. Introspecting, I concluded that I was resisting because I was afraid of ruining my own life.

So, knowing that a chance of becoming a bitter old man with little money, no respect, and nothing to show for it was one of the prices I might need to pay, I decided to come to terms with that fact once and for all. I spent time imagining this outcome in detail. I didn't try to explain it to myself, I didn't try to tell myself stories about how I'd avoid the outcome, I didn't try to tell myself it would be OK. I just pictured what would happen, considered the cost, weighed the price, and deemed the possibility of failure a price worth paying.

I didn't convince myself it would be *OK*, but I did decide that a chance of a not-OK outcome was a price worth paying.

And then those fears released their grip on me.

So when I was shaken by that high-stakes conversation, and my friend asked whether I had ever come to terms with the fact that I might set into motion a chain of events that leads to the end of the world, I laughed, and said no, but that I had done something similar, and that I knew the ritual. It was a simple task to repeat it, to go through the same mental motions but with larger stakes in mind.

Now, I'm a bit harder to shake.

(I'm sure this was not the only way I could have gotten used to high-stakes conversations, and undoubtedly exposure alone would have eventually had a similar effect. Nevertheless, this mental ritual sped up the process quite a bit, and I'm under the impression that it's helped me think more clearly when making high-stakes decisions across the board.)

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So, I say, if there are outcomes before you that seem unthinkableably terrible, then come to your terms with them. Don't explain them, don't excuse them, don't tolerify them, simply *visualize* them, and come to terms with the prices that you might need to pay.

You may be hurt. People you love may be hurt. You might break things that can't be fixed. The world might actually end. The point is not to convince yourself that you could handle the worst if it came, because maybe you won't be able to handle it. The point is simply to *know what the worst case looks like*.

If you know what it looks like, you can do your best to avoid it. The outcomes you can't consider control your actions. If you want to avoid the worst outcomes, you need to be able to weigh *all* the outcomes on the scales.

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(For those of you who are wondering, fear not; my friend ultimately succeeded in switching careers.)