

I Will Die Because My Grandfather Was Exposed To COVID-19

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I am, for the most part, a rational person. But I also have an anxiety disorder, and with that comes certain thought patterns that are anything but rational. One of these is called *catastrophizing*, defined below by Psychology Today¹:

"Catastrophizing is a cognitive distortion that prompts people to jump to the worst possible conclusion, usually with very limited information or objective reason to despair. When a situation is upsetting, but not necessarily catastrophic, they still feel like they are in the midst of a crisis."

I have catastrophized for my whole life. When I was in middle school, if my mom was late to come home from work, I assumed she had perished in a horrific, fiery car crash. When I was in graduate school, I was afraid of missing a day of work, because I was certain that if I didn't work for a day, then I wouldn't work for a week, then a month, and before I knew it, I'd be kicked out of my Ph.D. program and forced to sell ice cream on a street corner in Union Square. When I was hired as a faculty member I was terrified of teaching, because I thought that one bad class would lead to a bad set of course reviews, which would result in my not getting tenure, which would result in me losing my job and my apartment, and then I'd be homeless and on the street. I could give you many more examples.

Reason has no place in catastrophizing. I didn't stop to consider, for example, that maybe my mom was late getting home because traffic was bad. Nor did I stop to consider that most students don't pay enough attention for one bad class to have any impact on their course evaluations.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/catastrophizing>

In 2020, my grandfather was exposed to COVID-19 during an unrelated surgery at a hospital in the Atlanta area. It took multiple phone calls to get the full story out of the hospital staff, but basically, somebody temporarily left him in a room with someone else who had tested positive for the virus. Upon hearing this news, my brain got to work thinking of the horrible things that could happen next.

What if he gets COVID? I thought to myself, as I sat at my desk. *What if he dies? Would I go to his funeral? What if Mark shows up? What if Mark brings a gun? What if Mark is mad at all of us and what if he takes the funeral as an excuse to gun us all down?* I could see the headlines on CNN: "Mass Shooting at Funeral of Pandemic Victim." "Disturbed Man Murders Relatives at Family Funeral." I paused to consider. *I guess if he dies, and I go to his funeral, I'll take a Klonopin before the service starts. No, two. That way, if I get gunned down by Mark at my grandfather's funeral, at least I won't be anxious when I die.*

(Mark, for context, is my brother-in-law. I don't know for sure that he owns a gun. But he has spent part of his life living in Kennesaw, Georgia, a city that requires all households to own a gun², so I assume he is no exception to the rule.)

To appreciate how ridiculous this train of thought is, it's useful to take a step sideways and consider something not obviously related, namely `if/else` statements in computer programming. If I wanted to write a function that returns `Odd` when I feed it an odd number, and `Even` when I feed it an even number, the code I would need to do this in Python, a modern object-oriented programming language, would look something like this.

```
1 def isEvenOrOdd(number):
2     if number%2 == 0:
3         return 'Even'
4     else:
5         return 'Odd'
```

² <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/06/us/kennesaw-georgia-gun-ownership/index.html>

Line 1 tells the computer that you are defining a function and gives you the function name (here, it's `isEvenOrOdd`). Line two asks: when you divide the number by 2, is the remainder 0? If the answer is yes, Line 3 instructs the computer to return `Even`. Line 4 considers the situation in which the number divided by two is not zero, and if this is the case, Line 5 instructs the computer to return `Odd`. With this function defined, I could give the computer the command `isEvenOrOdd(6)`, and the computer would return `Even`. If I gave the computer the command `isEvenOrOdd(3)`, the computer would return `Odd`. Both the `if` and the `else` statements are necessary here; to make the computer do what we want it to do, we need to consider the possibility that the number will be even as well as the possibility that the number will be odd.

The funny thing about catastrophizing is that there are no `else` statements.

```
1  def grandfatherExposedToCovid():
2      if grandfather gets COVID:
3          if grandfather dies:
4              if grandfather has funeral:
5                  if I go to funeral:
6                      if Mark goes to funeral:
7                          if Mark owns a gun:
8                              if Mark brings a gun to the funeral:
9                                  if Mark shoots up the funeral:
10                                     return 'I will die'
```

There's no consideration of what would happen if my grandfather didn't get COVID-19. There's no consideration of what might happen if he contracted COVID-19 and didn't die. What if he didn't have a funeral, given the ongoing pandemic? What if I didn't go? What if Mark didn't own a gun? What if he didn't bring it to the funeral? What if he brought it to the funeral but didn't shoot anyone?

The catastrophizing mind does not pursue any of these possibilities. It sticks to its cascading chain of increasingly far-fetched *if* statements, returning an output that is utterly disconnected from the function call that prompted it.

And for the record, my grandfather never contracted COVID-19.