

## Nine Practices to Cope with a Looming Catastrophe

I've been in life-threatening situations for medical reasons multiple times. Some of what I do in those circumstances may be relevant for others in these catastrophic times. I have identified nine practices that I turn to under dire circumstances that help me get through the day, as it were.

### **Practice One: Is there something I can do now to prepare for the future?**

First and foremost, I make a distinction between what is happening now and what might happen in the future. I zoom out to a worst-case future scenario and decide if there are actions in the present I can take to mitigate or prepare for the future worst-case scenario. Sometimes the assessment reveals I need more information; there is leg work to do. Sometimes, the assessment tells me that there is psychological work to do.

### **Practice Two: Is Something Happening Right Now?**

If nothing horrible is happening in the precise moment I am in, I try to take advantage of it to do things that are calming. Sometimes this is as simple as taking a deep breath or looking at a photo of a beautiful flower or tranquil scene. In any moment I do not need to move into action, I try to just be.

### **Practice Three: Is Now a Good Time to Fully Absorb New Information?**

I ask myself whether the present moment is a good time to inhabit the full reality of my situation? Am I able to absorb new information or do I need to turn off temporarily?

### **Practice Four: What Is Sky, What Is Clouds?**

If I am fully immersed in a worst-case scenario, it helps to have an escape route. Buddhists talk about awareness like the sky, with our thoughts and feelings just clouds that pass through that open space. When I am able to dis-identify with the clouds of fear or worry and perceive a me-ness that is sky, it's a huge relief. I try to distinguish between a complex, threatening situation, and me. I am not the situation; I exist independent of it.

**Kaethe Weingarten, Ph.D.** | *The Witness to Witness Program*

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### **Practice Five: What Really Matters?**

Ever since my mother was diagnosed with a cancer from which she died many decades ago, I routinely ask myself the question, “What really matters?” I don’t expect myself, nor anyone else, to live a life that continuously demonstrates alignment with what really matters. I care about whether I can discern what’s really important in a day, a week, or in a big span of time, not whether there is a perfect fit between my purpose and behavior. In a life-threatening situation, it is important to me to ask this question and to pay close attention to the answers that emerge.

### **Practice Six: What Are the High Cards in My Deck?**

Let’s say that life is a deck of cards and that every day we shuffle through the 52 cards. Now let’s say the Ace is high and then, in order, there is the King, Queen, Jack, ten. Given this image, I believe that knowing the experiences that are my 10, Jack, Queen, King, Ace is important and that tolerating days when no high card shows up is also part of my practice.

Even in the midst of a terrible time, there may be a way to access moments of an experience that represents one of the higher cards. I try to do that. Looking at a tree, even a leaf, can be a high enough card that triggers a moment of calm or peace.

### **Practice Seven: What “Sticks” Will Help?**

I have walked slacklines. These days slack lines are too hard for me to balance on without two sticks, which I keep nearby. In this metaphor, if my life is a slackline, I ask myself what are my sticks? Do I need both? One? Knowing what my “sticks” are and knowing when and how to use them is helpful.

### **Practice Eight: How Useful Is this Story?**

We are story-making creatures and whether we are always aware of it or not, we live our lives inside stories we create. I check to see whether a story I am telling is a useful story. Depending on my answer, I may have to change the story I am telling. There are always alternative storylines and even if the alternative ones do not cover every aspect of our lived reality in any one moment, there may be a story we can tell ourselves that does help.

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### **Practice Nine: Why Not Me?**

We all know rationally that we are going to die but not all of us have to confront it routinely. I have found that reminding myself that the future is unknown can be helpful. In fact, it is precisely because the future is not known that any of us can live moment to moment with what I call “reasonable hope.” For me, solace comes from the fact that I know I don’t know what is going to happen, so there is always the possibility that something better than what seems to be true can happen.

Everybody needs healthy denial at times. I use something I call adaptive distancing. It gets me through difficult moments that are too hard to manage. But I am committed to addressing as fully as possible the miracles and the catastrophes of my life. The wonder and sorrow.

### **Conclusion:**

These nine practices are how I manage catastrophe. They allow me to live moment by moment feeling that life is hard, scary, and good.

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