

## HOW TO BUILD A LIFE



JAN BUCHCZIK

# Two Errors Our Minds Make When Trying to Grasp the Pandemic

Disappointment and uncertainty are inevitable. But we don't have to turn them into suffering.

**ARTHUR C. BROOKS**

*Editor's Note: "[How to Build a Life](#)" is a biweekly column by Arthur Brooks, tackling questions of meaning and happiness.*

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RECENTLY, I CHECKED IN on a friend who, like many of us, is "sheltering in place" during the coronavirus epidemic. I asked how she was doing. Not great, she told me.

When she wakes up every day, her first thoughts are about what she would have been doing if it weren't for the virus. Then she spends hours reading and watching everything she can about what the models are projecting and what the experts are saying about the crisis. She confessed that she is frittering away her time thinking about what might have been and what might happen, and ends her days frustrated and exhausted.

A lot of people are feeling this way as the quarantine drags on. There's so much we are missing from our old lives—graduations, weddings, family get-togethers, religious celebrations. There's so much uncertainty about what we can expect in the coming weeks and months.

It's natural to feel this way, of course. But many of us are likely fueling these negative feelings more than necessary, because of subtle cognitive errors. With knowledge and a little practice, these errors are easy to correct. By doing so, we can improve our outlook on the current situation and learn to be better thinkers in the future.

### **ERROR 1: CONFUSING DISAPPOINTMENT WITH REGRET**

My late father was a notorious pessimist. I remember once during a long road trip in rural Montana, he announced that we were probably going to run out of gas and have to spend the night in the car on the side of the road. I looked at the gas gauge and saw that the tank was more than half full. I asked why he assumed the absolute worst-case scenario was going to happen. "If I assume the worst, I'm less likely to be disappointed," he told me.

#### *Dear Therapist's guide to staying sane during a pandemic*

My dad might have been an extreme case, but in general, people *hate* being disappointed. Research shows that they are willing to go to great lengths to avoid it. Psychologists call this prospective outcome bias, and find that people are willing to make more of an effort to avoid disappointment than to raise the probability of success. In one experiment, nearly 90 percent of participants who already had an 85 percent chance of winning a \$5 gift card were willing to do busywork on a computer to raise their chances to 97 percent. But fewer participants (just over 60 percent) were willing to make the same effort to raise their chances when the likelihood of getting the gift card was low to start with. (In the second condition, their chances would have gone from 3 to 15 percent.)

But disappointment is very similar to another unpleasant emotion: regret. It's easy to confuse the two. They both involve wishing something better had occurred. Many psychology experiments have thus treated them synonymously, and, indeed, people often process these feelings in a similar way: through rumination and counterfactual thinking. Rumination—literally, “chewing the cud”—involves turning a scenario over and over in our minds, while counterfactual thinking is the process of imagining things turning out differently. This is what my friend was doing when she imagined her life in the absence of the coronavirus shutdown, and what you may be doing as well.

Rumination and counterfactual thinking are uniquely human abilities that, in the case of regret, allow us to learn and make improvements after we make an error. Imagine you say something stupid in a business meeting and your boss shows disapproval. You spend the rest of the day turning the incident over in your head and imagining what would have happened if you had said something else instead. As long as regret does not become obsessive, it is beneficial because it trains your brain to do something different next time.

*Read: Regret is the price of free will*

No good comes from applying rumination and counterfactual thinking to disappointment, however. The reason is the small-but-important distinction between regret and disappointment: agency. Research shows that when I experience regret, I think, “I should have known better.” With disappointment, I feel I have missed out on something beyond my control. There's no point in imagining over and over what could have been different about something I could not have affected; it simply creates a feedback loop that reinforces my disappointment, making me unhappier.

In short, rumination on what you would be doing if it weren't for the coronavirus is a destructive waste of your time.

## **ERROR 2: CONFUSING UNCERTAINTY WITH RISK**

Why does my friend spend so much time consuming information about the coronavirus? She isn't a scientist, and doesn't work on anything related to the pandemic. Still, she visits the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center every day to see if the curve of cases and deaths is flattening. She watches hours of news in which experts are interviewed about the pandemic's trajectory and when they think life will return to normal.

She is making another cognitive error: She is mistaking uncertainty for *risk*. Uncertainty involves unknown possible outcomes and thus unknowable probabilities. Risk involves known possible outcomes and probabilities that we can estimate. Risk is not especially scary, because it can be managed—indeed, risk management is the core business of the insurance industry. Uncertainty, on the other hand, is scary, because it is not manageable: We can't measure the likelihood and impacts of the unknowable.

At present, COVID-19 is more of an uncertainty than a risk. Will you get the virus? What happens if you do? When will the crisis end? Are we creating an economic depression? People can opine and make informed guesses, but no one really knows the answers to these questions.

It's natural to try to convert uncertainty into risk by gorging ourselves on available information. So we watch 24-hour news channels where hosts interview people with only marginally more knowledge than we have. We scour the internet for predictions. We look at the Dow Jones Industrial Average as if it were the zodiac. Surely, we think, if we just knew enough about something, we could accurately assess how much we're at risk.

*Read: The psychology of irrational fear*

But all of that is an exercise in futility. The information we now have about the coronavirus is incomplete; in an effort to apprehend risk, we have simply wallowed in more uncertainty. And after a few hours of doing that, we will be more anxious than when we began.

THE SOLUTION TO THESE two problems is to follow three simple steps: acknowledge, distinguish, resolve.

In the case of disappointment, start by acknowledging the fact that you are disappointed at missing out on some things—it would be strange if you weren't. Then, distinguish your disappointment from regret by thinking about your own role in this global catastrophe. Note that while the crisis affects you, you had no role in causing it, so rumination and counterfactual thinking aren't productive. Finally, resolve not to let your disappointment interfere with what you *can* affect and the choices you *can* make today.

These steps can help you manage living with uncertainty, as well. Start by acknowledging that you do not know what is going to happen in this crisis. Next, distinguish between what can and can't be known right now, and thus recognize that gorging on all the available information will not really resolve your knowledge deficit—you won't be able to turn uncertainty into risk by spending more hours watching CNN, because the certainty you seek is not attainable. Finally, resolve that while you don't know what will happen next week or next month, you do know that you are alive and well right now, and refuse to waste the gift of this day. (One more practical suggestion: Limit your consumption of news to half an hour in the morning, and stay off social media except to talk to friends. No cheating!)

Disappointment and uncertainty are inevitable, but we don't have to turn them into suffering. Ruminating over *what might have been* and *what might happen* will reliably deliver unhappiness. If you practice eliminating these mental errors during the pandemic, you'll be happier today, and better equipped to deal with the hard parts of ordinary life, whenever it resumes.

*We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter](#) to the editor or write to [letters@theatlantic.com](mailto:letters@theatlantic.com).*

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/04/how-stay-calm-during-pandemic/610390/>

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