

UNITED WISDOM

A catastrophic scenario and a preparation plan

Human Nature and Inner World

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Epigraph

> *“we suffer more often in imagination”*
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> *Seneca, Moral Letters to Lucilius, XIII.4, Richard Mott Gummere translation; excerpt. This is moral instruction, rather than an estimate of danger’s probability.*

What this article is about

In an imagined example, someone is invited to speak before colleagues. They open the presentation and see a chain of future events instead of slides: they will forget their words, the audience will notice weakness, the manager will lose trust, and their job will be threatened. They already want to decline. Another person checks equipment, prepares brief notes, and agrees who will help during a technical failure. Both are thinking about difficulties. Yet one mentally inhabits a completed catastrophe while the other changes the conditions of an event that has not happened.

This distinction cannot be reduced to optimism and pessimism. An apprehension can be correct and confidence careless. Preparation may be needed precisely because consequences are serious. The question is what our scenario does: helps identify a risk and choose an action, or turns a possibility into a verdict already delivered. We will examine the move from a frightening picture to a limited plan, its cost, its boundaries, and when preparation should end. Neither philosophical advice nor a list of steps guarantees safety. They may help us handle uncertainty more precisely without spending all our present life trying to experience every loss in advance.

I. Possibility has not yet established a sequence

A catastrophic account is convincing through its coherence. One event leads smoothly to the next, with hardly a question mark between them. Forget a phrase, and everyone will consider me incompetent; be considered incompetent, and I will receive no more work; lose work, and I will not cope with life afterwards. But smooth transitions belong to the account rather than to verified links. Each transition adds conditions that might occur, fail to occur, or remain unknown. Only an invitation to speak has happened in the present.

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It helps to unpack the chain without demanding immediate calm. What exactly might happen first? Which audience reaction is assumed? What is known about the manager's decisions? What options follow an unsuccessful presentation? The questions need not produce good answers. They restore the status of supposition to separate parts. Instead of a single fall into an abyss, several branches appear: forget a word and continue, receive a comment and revise, or decline an unsuitable format. Some branches are unpleasant, but unpleasantness does not make them one inevitable sequence.

“It could happen” also differs from “it will certainly happen.” The first leaves a task of assessment and preparation. The second may cancel it: why prepare if the outcome is determined? Sometimes someone calls preparation the repeated confirmation of that second statement. They rehearse consequences without checking conditions. This feels responsible from within because the subject is serious. Its usefulness is better judged by its result: did new information appear, did the plan change, was a next step defined, or was the same ending merely drawn again?

We need not calculate an invented probability to begin distinguishing the links. Without data, an honest “I don't yet know” is more accurate than a number made up for confidence. Where information exists, obtain it: presentation requirements, timing, audience composition, permitted notes. Specific information reduces the area of fantasy without promising to remove it altogether. This article's authorial proposal is to name the nearest testable event before discussing distant consequences. It is not a universal psychological treatment technique, but a way to avoid confusing many suppositions with one established fact.

II. Severity and probability are different questions

Some events are rare but serious. Others occur often at a comparatively small cost. Merge these dimensions, and a strong feeling automatically increases the estimated probability: if I am frightened, danger must be near. Yet fear may express the importance of what is at stake. The person values work, loved ones, reputation, or freedom. That is an important message about the cost of a possible outcome, but it does not itself say how often the outcome occurs under comparable conditions.

Consider a trip. Cancelled transport, lost luggage, and an unexpected need for urgent assistance require different decisions. For the first, time allowance and another route can help; for the second, essentials kept separately and preserved documents; for the third, verified information about available assistance and suitable travel conditions. Risks do not all demand equal reflection. A decision depends on consequences, available information, the cost of protection, and whether action now can change anything. Medical and insurance recommendations are deliberately absent here: they require specific circumstances and specialist sources.

A low probability sometimes does not remove the value of a precaution. A backup presentation file is useful even without an expected technical failure. A high probability sometimes needs no extensive plan: an unfamiliar question will almost certainly arise, and it may be enough to permit yourself to say you must check. Preparation need not match the size of the fright. It matches the task. This distinction takes fear seriously without giving it authority to determine expenditure without examining the conditions.

There is also a limit: not every risk can be assessed reliably. Rare events may offer little data, and a new situation may offer no comparable experience. We can choose caution based on consequences while explicitly preserving an unknown probability. “I am taking a copy of the documents because making one is easy and its absence could complicate matters” is more accurate than “I know the documents will be lost.” This ties the action to its actual reason. We can prepare without declaring disaster inevitable or arguing with ourselves until the troubling image disappears completely.

III. Anticipation becomes a plan when action appears

A plan has an observable output. It names a situation, an action, an executor, a resource, and a point for reconsideration. “If everything goes wrong, I will pull myself together” offers little help in a specific difficulty. “If the projector fails, I will open the saved version on the laptop and explain the main point from my notes” links a condition to an available response. It does not guarantee that the laptop works. But we can test, revise, and limit it in advance, unlike a general duty to be prepared for everything.

In Gollwitzer’s 1999 paper, pages 493–494, an implementation intention links a situation with a specific response. The definition was read, not the whole protocol. An if–then format guarantees no success. Our presentation and travel examples are editorial applications.

A good plan distinguishes action from outcome. We can prepare notes but cannot command a high assessment from the audience. We can request an answer but cannot make someone a compulsory source of support. We can put resources aside without promising they will cover any loss. A plan requiring control of another person's response or an unknown future becomes impossible. Name your action narrowly enough to establish afterwards whether it happened, and substantively enough for it to address the risk.

For some threats, personal action is insufficient. A response needs coordinated teamwork, agreed authority, available means, or a changed environment. “Just prepare” then unfairly transfers a shared risk to one individual. If the presentation venue is technically unreliable, check conditions with organisers. If work has impossible deadlines, discuss deadlines. Preparation includes the right to discover that a task lacks the required resources. That is a

conclusion about the situation, not evidence of insufficient resilience. Sometimes the wisest plan is to change participation or decline it.

IV. Philosophical courage does not cancel actual danger

In Seneca's Letter XIII, Gummere translation, §§4–14, the grounds for anticipated fear are examined; §14 returns to a stricter Stoic tone. This is philosophical instruction. Our question about the timing of suffering neither turns it into safety statistics nor accepts the glorification of death.

Epictetus's Enchiridion §4, Higginson translation, imagines bathing with obstacles included. The Stoic task of preserving intention differs from contemporary protection of conditions; not every obstacle needs acceptance.

These sources can prompt an uncomfortable question: do I require the absence of every difficulty before beginning to live? If so, preparation can never finish. Another failure, judgment, or possibility of loss will always be available. Yet "danger exists only in your head" is equally inaccurate. Documents can be lost, people can be cruel, and circumstances can be unfavourable. Philosophical work on judgment must coexist with factual assessment of threats; otherwise it becomes a way of overlooking actual living conditions.

We therefore need not choose between courage and protection. In the imagined presentation scene, the person prepares materials, clarifies the format, and may remain nervous. That does not mean preparation failed. They can participate with nervousness if conditions are acceptable, or decline if conditions are genuinely unacceptable. The distinction is between an examined decision and one made by an inward picture alone. A historical text supplies a language of reflection; the contemporary situation supplies the grounds for choice. Neither should swallow the other, and each retains the boundary of its competence.

V. Preparation costs something and may end

We can spend an entire evening on a backup plan and lose time for the main preparation. We can buy too much protection and leave insufficient money for the trip itself. We can check equipment repeatedly and become exhausted before speaking. Even an individually reasonable action changes its meaning when repeated without new grounds. Preparation costs money, time, attention, relationships, and forgone tasks. These costs do not become zero because they concern safety or responsibility.

Define in advance what will count as sufficient. The working version is checked, a copy saved, two key points named, and the time confirmed. This list completes a concrete task without guaranteeing that nervousness disappears. If completion requires absolute confidence, the list can expand endlessly. Confidence depends on more than task completion, so it cannot always

be the sole stopping criterion. We can know preparation is done while still feeling unfinished inside.

A new fact calls for reconsideration. Organisers changed the room, cancelled the equipment, or shortened the time: these are reasons to check again. The same image returning without new information does not itself create a task. This distinction does not forbid listening to concern, which may reveal an overlooked detail. But name the detail. “What if everything is bad?” cannot be checked; “I don't know where the backup file is” can. Checking the second statement makes a decision about further attention more definite.

The right to finish preparation matters in relationships too. If someone asks loved ones endlessly to confirm that nothing bad will happen, nobody can meet that request completely. Support becomes the supply of an impossible guarantee. Instead, ask for specific involvement: reviewing notes, helping with a route, being available afterwards. The other person may agree within their capacity. Preparation then distributes actual work instead of making relationships serve an uncertainty with no finite volume.

For the imagined presentation, one can keep a brief record: which file was checked, where the copy is stored, and what equipment the organisers confirmed. Tomorrow this makes the decision’s grounds visible even if confidence changes. The record does not become a new checking ritual: it preserves information already obtained. If the information becomes outdated, update that information. If doubt merely returns, the person can read the record and name the remaining question. A decision then has accessible grounds, and another action has a specific reason.

VI. Repeated reflection can be useful or fruitless

In Edward Watkins's 2008 review, whose abstract and conclusion were read here, repetitive thought is not labelled uniformly harmful. Its consequences are related to content, context, and mode of processing. The author explicitly calls the proposed framework preliminary. Our narrow point is that repetition alone establishes neither usefulness nor uselessness. The review does not diagnose the reader or demonstrate the effectiveness of the everyday exercises described here.

We can revisit a difficult question several times and change a decision each time: clarify conditions, find a contradiction, agree with someone, or remove a needless step. We can revisit just as often and merely experience one outcome repeatedly. The difference appears in what remains afterwards. A record, an action, or a considered choice not to act gives the process an output. If only the need to start again remains, examine the task you were attempting. Perhaps it was the impossible task of obtaining knowledge about the future.

Reflection sometimes persists because an unpleasant feeling seems to indicate unfinished work. Nervousness after checking a file becomes a signal to check again. Yet the feeling and the file's state are separate. The file can be saved while nervousness remains; nervousness can disappear while it is unsaved. Directly checking the accessible object is more reliable than inferring its state from our mood. This is editorial reasoning about verification criteria, rather than an explanation of all repeated checking or advice for independently treating clinical symptoms.

Change “how can I achieve certainty?” into “which task remains unresolved now?” Without an answer, we can recognise residual uncertainty and return to the main activity. With an answer, perform a limited action. Ask about presentation length rather than watching more videos about failure; read ticket cancellation terms rather than listing every possible travel disaster. This move need not feel easy. It gives thought an addressee and a result instead of requiring us immediately to stop being afraid.

VII. Planning for a bad outcome differs from living inside it

Suppose the presentation really goes badly. In an imagined case, the speaker loses the thread, exceeds the time, and receives criticism. Preparation did not prevent difficulty. We must now distinguish the event, its actual consequences, and the earlier chain. A manager requesting revision is one thing; removing someone from a project is another. We need not consider failure beneficial, but neither must we accept the whole catastrophic account as proven merely because its first link occurred.

A limited recovery plan can be prepared: obtain specific feedback, preserve working materials, set a revision deadline, or discuss changing the format. This differs from a duty to turn every failure into victory. Sometimes a result cannot be fully corrected. Sometimes actual losses occur. A prepared resource may then help us bear the consequence or choose again, while keeping the loss a loss. We need not discover a hidden gift in order to value available help and our continuing life.

Imagine not only the impact but the time after it. A catastrophic picture often ends at the strongest emotion: everyone is looking, I am disgraced, nothing else exists. A plan restores the calendar. What happens in an hour, tomorrow, or next week? Who can be approached? Which obligations remain? What should be checked before a final decision? These questions guarantee no easy recovery. They show that one intense moment does not necessarily contain the entire subsequent history or determine all its options in advance.

An available resource may be external rather than internal. Professional advice, financial assistance, a changed schedule, or help from loved ones may be required. A call for the right attitude must not replace them. Nor should we invent other people's promises: agreement to

help is clarified before inclusion in a plan. Realistic preparation names support at its actual scale. If that scale is unknown, finding it out is a separate task. A recovery plan thus remains connected to real people and means, rather than another comforting image that nobody agreed to fulfil.

VIII. Refusal can also result from preparation

An achievement culture often judges preparation by whether it helped someone take the stage. Yet examining conditions may show that participation is unsuitable. Time is insufficient, a requirement breaks an agreement, consequences are excessive, or resources are absent. Refusal, postponement, or a changed format may then be a mature result of work. This does not make every refusal wise: it too requires grounds. But action alone does not demonstrate courage, and refusal alone does not demonstrate avoidance.

Check the decision against the purpose. What is the presentation for? If it conveys information, writing may serve better. If it develops a skill, a small rehearsal before two people may be appropriate. If it is a required report, conditions must be discussed with those establishing the requirement. Purpose prevents one means of performance from becoming the only test of personal adequacy. Not every stage we are invited to must become an examination of our entire person.

A chosen pause also differs from indefinite delay. A pause can have a reason, a deadline, and a condition of return: clarify the format, restore resources, obtain an answer. Delay without a condition keeps the task open and makes us decide again daily. If the task no longer fits our intentions, we can close it with a refusal instead of inventing a future date for courage. Responsibility lies in clarity towards participants and respect for agreements, rather than endlessly preserving every potential possibility.

Here preparation becomes a practice of freedom. It subordinates us neither to fear nor to an ideal of fearlessness. It makes conditions, costs, and options visible. We can then choose participation, change, or refusal and reconsider after the outcome. Nervousness may accompany every option without cancelling the work. Decision quality is examined against available information and the situation. Emotional smoothness is not compulsory evidence of quality and should not become another demand placed on ourselves.

IX. The present need not disappear for the future

Return to the person before the presentation. They know the two main points, saved the file, clarified the time, and prepared a response to a technical failure. Fear remains that others will evaluate them less favourably than hoped. This possibility cannot be eliminated. They are facing a boundary of preparation rather than a new preparation task. They can acknowledge that the event matters, the result is unknown, and available work is done. This is not a grand pronouncement. It permits closing the laptop and spending the remaining evening.

When preparation consumes ordinary activities, the future governs the present before the event. Someone stops eating with family, resting, and doing other work to protect tomorrow's presentation. Intensified preparation can sometimes be appropriate temporarily. But its cost should be seen rather than treated as proof of seriousness. A necessary protection can quietly undermine the resource it intended to preserve. Considering cost restores the task's place among other activities instead of its right to occupy the whole of life.

How we address ourselves afterwards matters too. “Now nothing bad will happen” makes a promise the plan cannot keep. “If it happens, I prepared badly” creates another false contract. More precise wording names the limit: “I did what was available; part of the outcome depends on conditions and other people.” This does not remove responsibility for an obvious omitted step. It prevents every external difficulty from becoming proof of personal inadequacy. Responsibility is preserved precisely by distinguishing what the person actually answered for.

A plan is good when it leaves room for the event itself. We can hear an unfamiliar question, notice unexpected help, change pace, or acknowledge difficulty. A catastrophic scenario generally knows everything in advance and narrows the encounter. Preparation knows only part and retains the ability to update. Finishing it does not abandon attention. It abandons the illusion that attention requires endlessly rehearsing disaster. The future may be difficult. Present life need not become its preliminary copy before information establishes what actually requires our action.

Also check who owns the next step. If the plan requires someone’s help, agreement still needs to occur. Writing “If difficulties arise, my colleague will fix everything” does not make that colleague a participant. Ask beforehand about availability and limits, keep the answer, and consider action without assistance. This gives preparation an external basis without treating someone’s goodwill as a resource already controlled without consent.

What this means in practice

Take one limited upcoming task. Name its nearest unwanted outcome without a subsequent life story: forget a point, arrive late, receive no reply. Separate information about probability from the cost of consequences; preserve unknowns where information is absent. Choose one preventive measure and one available response if the outcome occurs. Name an executor, a resource, and a condition. Do not include another person's help without agreement or promise control of another person's assessment.

Set a stopping criterion: which facts must be checked and how much attention you will spend. If a frightening picture returns afterwards, ask whether it adds a new specific task. Return to the plan for a new fact. With the same unknown, you can leave it unknown and continue other activities. This approach concerns everyday planning rather than independent treatment of anxiety conditions.

Afterwards, compare the forecast with what happened. Note the prepared step's usefulness, cost, and unnecessary actions. Do not turn luck into proof of absolute safety or failure into proof of inevitable catastrophe. The next plan aims to fit conditions better. Sometimes that requires more preparation, sometimes less, and sometimes another form of participation. In each case, a testable action is more useful than an endless duty to experience every possible loss in advance.

For a shared task, identify separately who decides which risk is acceptable. The executor need not silently accept every consequence of an organiser's decision. They can present a vulnerability, propose an available change, and record the agreement. This matters when a backup depends on several people: one preserves materials, another checks the venue, a third confirms timing. No reply does not confirm readiness. The plan then becomes an agreement among actual participants rather than a personal duty to compensate for every uncertainty. If agreement is absent, its absence remains a fact considered in the decision to participate.

Key quotation

> *“weigh carefully your hopes”*
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> *Seneca, Letter XIII.13, Gummere; excerpt. Examination of hope accompanies examination of fear; this is philosophical instruction, not a calculation of probability.*

Connections between traditions

Approaches	Similarity	Boundary
Seneca ↔ checking a forecast	Distinguishing present and anticipated	Stoic instruction does not estimate probability
Epictetus §4 ↔ preparation	Editorial question: which next step is available?	Harmony with nature does not replace protecting conditions
Gollwitzer ↔ an everyday plan	Linking a condition with a response	A plan guarantees neither success nor disappearance of fear
Watkins ↔ assessing reflection	Repetition has different consequences	A preliminary framework is neither diagnosis nor individual forecast
Planning ↔ freedom to decline	Conditions make choice explicit	Action and courage are not identical

Primary sources

• Seneca. Moral Letters, XIII, Richard Mott Gummere translation, Loeb, displayed title-page reprint 1925, Wikisource. The letter, §§1–17, was read; §§4–14 used.

• Epictetus. Enchiridion, §4, Thomas W. Higginson translation, Liberal Arts Press 1955, PG45109. The paragraph and adjacent context were read.

• Peter M. Gollwitzer. Implementation Intentions: Strong Effects of Simple Plans, 1999, American Psychologist 54, 493–503. Pages 493–494 read; the other experiments are not claimed as fully checked.

• Edward R. Watkins. Constructive and Unconstructive Repetitive Thought, 2008, DOI 10.1037/0033-2909.134.2.163. Abstract and conclusion read; a review rather than a single experiment. Modern rights UNKNOWN; complete texts are not republished.

Tags

catastrophic scenario, preparation, risk, probability, consequences, plan, if then, unknown, Seneca, Epictetus, Stoicism, Gollwitzer, Watkins, repetitive thought, presentation, trip, resource, recovery, cost, deadline, choice, refusal, control, present, action

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