



THE
**verywell
mind
podcast**

WITH THERAPIST
Amy Morin

Follow Our Show:

[Verywell Mind](#) - [Apple](#) - [Spotify](#) - [Google](#)



212 — Friday Fix: Stop Making Your Biggest Fears Come True

Welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast*. I'm Amy Morin, editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength.

You're listening to The Friday Fix. Every Friday, I share a quick mental strength strategy that can help fix the thoughts, feelings, and actions that can hold you back in life.

And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys!

Don't forget to subscribe to us on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week.

Now let's dive into today's episode!

Today, I'm talking about why we sometimes make our biggest fears come true.

Obviously we don't do it on purpose. But sometimes we become so focused on preventing something bad from happening that we actually make it come true.

This isn't about victim blaming or to say that people are the cause of their unfortunate circumstances. Obviously, there are lots of situations where something horrible happens and we have zero responsibility.

I don't want you to think I'm saying that you're going to make an irrational fear come true. Like I hate snakes. But my fear of snakes doesn't make me more likely to die from a rattlesnake bite.

But what I'm talking about are those things that we worry about happening so much that we actually behave in a way that increases the chances that the unfortunate thing actually happens.

There are three main reasons this happens:

1. We think so much about our fear that we get caught up in worrying rather than taking helpful action—like you're worried about a weather report that says you may get a hurricane that you stay glued to the news and don't prepare for the storm.
2. We work so hard to prevent our fear from coming true that we inadvertently make it more likely to happen. If you stand up in front of a crowd to give a speech and all you keep thinking is "Don't forget your lines," you might distract yourself so much that you actually forget what you're going to say.
3. That thing we're trying to avoid actually feels familiar. You might tell yourself you're never going to have a terrible relationship like your parents had only to find yourself in a similar relationship because that's what you know.
4. We compensate for our fear in a way that makes it more likely to happen. Someone who is terrified of driving over bridges might drive 100 miles out of their way every day to get to work without going over a bridge—which increases the chances that they might die in a car crash.

When you see someone else do it, it's easy to pinpoint where things went wrong. But, it's much tougher to see when we're doing this.

A classic example of this is when parents are overprotective of their kids. They shield them from anything potentially harmful and don't let them make mistakes or try things on their own because they don't want them to get physically hurt or emotionally scarred.

Then, their kids don't learn the skills they need to make healthy decisions or to recover from hardship and they fall apart the second they get away from mom and dad because they don't know how to make good choices or they don't know how to recover from failure or how to handle rejection. Ultimately, the parents' attempts to keep their kids safe backfires and their biggest fear—that their child will get hurt or experience pain—are more likely to come true.

We see this happen with first year college students who crumble at the first bad grade or who don't know how to handle a disagreement with their roommates.

In fact, when researchers have asked college students if they were prepared for college, most of them say they were academically prepared but 60% of them say they weren't emotionally prepared. That's because their parents didn't give them opportunities to practice dealing with struggles—probably because they wanted to protect them from pain.

From the outside, it's easy to see that a parents' attempt to shield their kids from pain is going to backfire. But when you're the anxious parent trying to keep your kid from getting hurt, it feels like protecting them right now is the best thing you can do.

Overprotective parenting is just one example of how sometimes we turn our biggest fears into a reality. I've seen lots of different scenarios in my therapy office and in my personal life play out where someone makes one of their biggest fears more likely to come true.

Here are some examples:

One of my former therapy client's biggest fear was being lonely. But she acted so desperate to be around people that she actually repelled them. She was so afraid of conversations ending or people not talking to her that she talked incessantly. If someone was politely trying to end the conversation, she kept talking because she didn't want them to leave. So of course, people avoided her sometimes and didn't want to spend time with her because she wouldn't stop talking. The way she responded to her fear of being lonely meant she inadvertently made her biggest fear come true.

Here's another example. I have a friend who was overweight when she was a kid. So her biggest fear was that her kids would become overweight like she was.

So she measured their food so she could accurately count their calories, made a huge deal about eating healthy, and forbid them to ever eat anything she considered to be junk food. Because they spent so much time focusing on food and restricting their intake, both of her kids began sneaking food whenever they could.

Their friends even brought them extra snacks to eat at school. You know how this story goes, right? To her horror, both kids developed serious problems with eating and food which was the number one thing she was trying to prevent.

So while it sounds ridiculous on the surface, self-fulfilling prophecies happen all the time.

The more we think about something (like ruminating on a mistake we made or something we don't want to happen), the more likely we are to behave in a way that increases the chances that our fear will come true.

What you pay attention to will grow. When we have a big fear, we often think about it all the time. It takes a lot of mental energy. And it affects how we behave.

It doesn't just happen with the giant fears that last over the course of decades. Sometimes, it happens on a smaller scale too.

Here's another example that I've heard from several different people. I've done this one myself too.

Imagine this scenario:

You go to a networking event. And you are afraid you won't have anyone to talk to. So you spend most of the event thinking about how awkward you look standing in the corner by yourself. Rather than walk around and talk to people, you decide to avoid embarrassing yourself any further and stay in the corner. Since no one is talking to you, you leave early. It's a classical example of how you might make your fear come true.

And here's one more scenario:

Imagine that you're a baseball player. You step up to the plate feeling nervous. You repeatedly tell yourself, "Don't strike out. Don't strike out." Well guess what? Now that you're focused on striking out, you might raise your anxiety, reduce your concentration, and increase the chances that you strike out. You'd be much better off stepping up to the plate telling yourself, "Keep your eye on the ball."

I know this might sound a little hypocritical since I write books about what not to do. But take my first book—13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do—for example. The first thing is don't feel sorry for yourself. Well that's a helpful strategy in the overall big picture of your life. If you walked around all day repeatedly thinking, "Don't feel sorry for yourself," you might then feel like a failure each time you start to feel self-pity—and then you might pity yourself even more.

I think it's helpful to frame those big things in life you want to avoid in terms of "don't," like maybe your goal goal is "don't go into debt." But if you're dealing with something you need to focus on right now, frame it is what to do. For example, when I was a foster parent, I tried to teach my foster kids what to do. Instead of saying, "Don't yell at the dinner table," I'm better off reminding them what to do—like "Use an inside voice."

So how do you prevent this negative cycle from happening?

The first step is to notice when you're afraid that something will happen. When you feel afraid or you're thinking about something awful happening, pause.

Take a minute and ask yourself how much time am I devoting to thinking about this? If you're consumed with worry, you're at risk of making poor choices.

Also assess your level of fear. Is it out of proportion to the actual level of risk you face?

Take a look at your behavior next. What steps are tempted to take to prevent this thing from happening? And how might your behavior actually backfire?

Again this is hard to see within ourselves. You might need some outside perspective. Talk to someone you trust—a friend, a family member, or a therapist if you can. Ask them if they see any hint of behavior that actually might cause your biggest fears to come true. Listen to them and take their words into consideration.

It takes a lot of mental strength to do something that is ultimately sabotaging yourself. But you are just borrowing a little peace today that you'll have to pay back tomorrow. You might feel better when you are overprotective of your kids today, but you'll worry more when you're not there to protect them.

Sometimes it takes professional help because when you change your behavior, you're likely to feel a little worse before you eventually start feeling better.

If this is something you struggle with and you can't seem to change your behavior on your own, talk to a therapist if you can. If you can't, you might try self-help strategies—like listening to this podcast or reading books on the subject can help. You might also find it's helpful to journal or talk to someone you trust to get things sorted out so you don't accidentally do things that increase the chances that your biggest fears actually do come true.

If you know someone who could benefit from learning more about mental strength, share this show with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Do you want free access to my online course? It's called "10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential." To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We'll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!*

And as always, a big thank you to my show's producer (who once went with me to see Stephen King's house because he isn't afraid of scary stories), Nick Valentin.