

What If You Killed the What-Ifs?

I was talking to a friend this morning who was in a bad place. He'd forgotten to do some work over the weekend, and he wondered how to handle the inevitable let down when his supervisor found out.

He asked what he should do. I asked what his options were.

He said there were two. He could try to fake that he'd done the work and do a terrible job on his deliverables. Or he could preemptively fess up, say sorry, and ask how best to make it up this week.

I said option two sounded like it had a higher probability of limiting the damage than option one.

He responded with a series of 'What ifs'. He was imagining all the bad things that might happen. I said okay, what about option one? Same what ifs.

I asked him if he could control what the supervisor did in response to whatever approach he chose. He said no. I said, "Then forget the what ifs. They are irrelevant. They'll happen regardless. Focus on what you can control and pick the course of action with the highest probability for the least painful outcome. Then stop thinking about it."

He felt paralyzed by the what ifs. Stressing over eventualities he couldn't control froze his decision making process. He was going to default to option one, not because he thought it was better, but because he never had time to think clearly and choose due to all the worry about what might happen two steps down the road.

Kill the what ifs. Take the step in front of you based on the best evidence you have. See what happens. Take in the feedback. Adjust. Choose the next step.

That's it. It really is that simple. But it's hard. We worry a lot about many things out of our control, or only potentially in our control in the future based on a series of responses out of our control.

If you want less stress, think about fewer things. But think about them well.