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When you Fear the Unknown: Coping with Uncertainty

We do our best to talk ourselves into believing many different things when facing something unknown. Sometimes, we say that "everything happens for a reason," "this too shall pass," or "it is what it is" to calm our minds, soothe our worries, and ease our fears. While it's not always as simple as that, we are processing and trying to cope with uncertainty. It's instinctive. We need reassurance and clarity to feel secure.

In this article, we'll reframe uncertainty as a part of life that is constant and explore signs to recognize when it's affecting us negatively. We will also investigate why we have such difficulty dealing with uncertainty, a trait referred to as Intolerance of Uncertainty (IU). There are things we can do to become more comfortable with uncertainty – since it doesn't ever go away entirely and can resurface when you least expect it.

Uncertainty is part of life

Have you ever wondered what it would be like if our lives weren't full of uncertainty and we had everything mapped out? It's hard to imagine because no one comes into this world with complete blueprints for their life. Not knowing how things will play out can be a source of anxiety and can cause panic attacks.

Our brains are always on the lookout for dangerous situations. We can sense fear, and "our bodies respond automatically" to protect us.¹

When facing uncertainty, we might experience an increased heart rate and more rapid breathing to "increase oxygen and blood going to our muscles" and sweat to control our temperature.² We also re-prioritize bodily functions "that aren't immediately important" in a stressful situation and release adrenaline "to give us energy" and cortisol to both "relieve pain" and "block rational thinking" to focus on survival.³

Essentially, we activate our fight, flight, freeze, flop, and friend responses⁴:

- Flight – responding to a dangerous situation physically or verbally
- Flight – removing yourself from the situation to put you in a safer space
- Freeze – "going tense, still and silent" as an "instinctive survival response"

- Flop – shutting down your mind in response to pain and having your muscles relax and become loose so “your body goes floppy”
- Friend – instinctively calling for help from a friend, bystander, “and/or ‘befriending’” an aggressor to try and negotiate or talk your way out of a situation

What else do we tend to do in the face of uncertainty?

Humans “crave information about the future” and “perceive ambiguity as a threat,” so our brains try to “protect us by diminishing our ability to focus on anything other than creating certainty.”⁵ Think for a moment about how we have been learning to deal with uncertainties stemming from the pandemic or what we tend to do when we’re uncertain about our health and perhaps awaiting a medical diagnosis. These are stressful situations for us to figure out because they introduce changes to our regular routines.

For example, while awaiting a medical diagnosis or noticing a change in their health, many people search the Internet for information that could explain their symptoms. Unfortunately, this behaviour can result in an overwhelming amount of information, that is not always credible and can lead to more worry and uncertainty. Looking for answers is part of the quest for certainty: we can’t help ourselves.

Of course, we also can experience uncertainty in other areas of our lives. For example, “research shows that job uncertainty,” that is, worrying about our work and connected finances, is often worse than “actually losing our job.”⁶

Intolerance of Uncertainty (IU)

In some cases, extreme worry, anxiety, and stress associated with not knowing can create problems that may affect how someone handles a situation. Some people can cope with more uncertainty than others who “cannot stand even the smallest amount of uncertainty.”⁷ People that are uncomfortable with uncertainty may opt to stick with familiar situations and spend much of their energy on avoiding, eliminating or controlling the negative associations they experience with uncertainty.⁸ They could be viewed as perfectionists, have an “inflated sense of responsibility” or even “behave as though they have a phobia of uncertainty.”⁹ In cases where anxiety creates peak amounts of distress that seriously affect someone, specialized therapy may provide some comfort and relief. The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent example of people experiencing high degrees of Intolerance of Uncertainty. Researchers have discovered that the general uncertainty associated with the pandemic correlates to

excessive amounts of physiological and psychological stress, which in turn has created increased anxiety, emotional problems, depression, and other mental health concerns.¹⁰

Unhealthy ways of coping with uncertainty

There are several ways that people try to cope with uncertainty that are unproductive and result in more significant stress.

- Using **worrying** as a tool for trying to predict the future. Worrying can give you the illusion of control over uncertain circumstances.
- **Compulsively seeking information** can make people feel overwhelmed, depressed, or panicky. It results in a situation where it’s difficult to determine what information is credible and what is misinformation because it all creates more uncertainty.
- **Isolating** ourselves only results in increased feelings of anxiety and loneliness. During the early days of the pandemic, for example, when restrictions were a way to reduce the spread of infection, many people experienced anger, doubt, mistrust, and fear because they had never experienced anything similar.

How can you get more comfortable with uncertainty?

Psychologists have offered tips on how to deal with uncertainty more effectively. These include¹¹:

- **Using self-compassion** and allowing time and space to feel and experience your emotions.
- **Practicing acceptance** where you reflect on how life has always been uncertain.
- **Staying in the present** to avoid overthinking or distractions that have us examine the past or guess at the future.
- **Reflecting on past experiences** to address uncertainty and promote personal growth.
- **Practicing self-care, embracing our instincts and self-awareness** can help ground us and offer a chance to relax and recharge.
- **Planning for change** and uncertainty to feel better prepared to respond to future situations.

Keep things manageable by choosing three areas of focus

1. Start by focusing on what is within your control and act only on those things. If you find yourself drifting back to negative thoughts, try clearing your mind using meditation, exercising, or doing something else you love.
2. Reduce social media, news, and Internet use so you develop greater awareness of what information you are consuming and sharing. Consider that social media rarely presents authentic situations. Stick with credible sources and avoid comparisons to other people or situations.
3. Finally, focus on what brings you joy including:
 - Hobbies
 - Social connections
 - Spending and making time for those who you determine you want in your life and where you are both benefiting from the relationship
 - Gratitude journaling
 - Affirmations and being kind to yourself

Being able to reframe your thinking about uncertainties in our lives may help you learn to become more content with them. You'll reduce harmful stress and negative thought patterns and achieve better well-being, ready to embrace life with more optimism daily.

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