6 Tips for Coping in Uncertain Times

We are living in an unprecedented time. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we have lost some control we previously felt we had over what will happen next— in our daily schedules, our children's education, our careers and businesses, our health, our access to resources, and our relationship with loved ones and our community. For many of us, there is not a clear plan of when, how, and if life will return to how we knew it before. We know from previous research that worries and depression are often much higher when dealing with uncertainty. So, how can we cope in a time of such uncertainty? Here's a guide to help you – and your children – learn the coping tips that will help with living in uncertain times.

What does tolerating uncertainty mean?

Why are some people more affected by uncertainty than others? "Uncertainty tolerance" is our ability to cope with or accept uncertain or ambiguous situations. We cannot predict the future or control all outcomes, and so some uncertainty in life is inevitable.

Someone with high tolerance for uncertainty is better able to accept and adapt to outcomes they can't predict or control. One study showed that people with a higher tolerance for uncertainty were more likely to cooperate with and trust other people. People with low tolerance for uncertainty, on the other hand, are more likely to experience anxiety and stress associated with the unknown.

How do I know if I have trouble coping with uncertainty?

Some common behaviors people exhibit when they struggle with tolerating uncertainty are:
- Excessive reassurance seeking from others or constantly asking questions
- Checking and double-checking news outlets, social media or emails
- Checking-in multiple times daily with friends or loved ones
- Not allowing others to help out of fear it will not be done right unless they do it themselves
- Avoiding and procrasting tasks or situations that provoke anxiety or a sense of uncertain outcomes
- Distraction or keeping oneself overly busy to avoid having to think about uncertainty
- Engaging in unhealthy coping such as excessive drinking or risky behaviors

How can I get better at coping with uncertainty?

The good news is that the skill of tolerating uncertainty is like a muscle. If we train and practice coping with uncertain situations, we can grow stronger and improve at doing so. Here are some tips for coping with uncertainty:

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1. Practice Mindfulness

We can better cope with uncertainty if we can develop a willingness to experience the discomfort of it, without trying to change or eliminate it. Being mindful means intentionally bringing our awareness into the present moment, without judgement. We can focus on what we know is happening right now, without thinking about what might happen in the future. Mindfulness exercises help us learn to observe our present thoughts, feelings and environment as they are, without attempting to alter them. We can practice being mindful about uncertainty and our discomfort with it, so we can be more willing to experience it without additional stress. Check out tips and tricks for using mindfulness and meditation here.

2. Work through the stressful thoughts

When we are faced with uncertainty, we can experience automatic negative thoughts that pop into our minds unintentionally. If we can identify and challenge those thoughts, we will be better able to cope with them. Here are some common thoughts associated with uncertainty and ways to work through them:

- **Shoulds/musts**: Thinking that things should or must be a certain way sets us up to have expectations that can let us down. Try to catch thoughts framed in this way, and rephrase them as, "I'd like for things to be this way, but I may not have as much control over the outcome as I would like."
- **Predicting the future**: No one can predict the future. But often our thoughts try to do this in order to guide our current behaviors. As humans, we like to be able to plan, thus we often try to anticipate the future. Unfortunately, our future prediction thoughts can often be catastrophic and stressful. Try to focus on the present, remember that you are doing your best to create the future you want, and that is all you can do.
- **What-ifs**: Sometimes, we can overanalyze a situation by considering all the possible angles and outcomes, all the "what-ifs." When we are stressed, "what if" thoughts can paralyze us and stop us from taking any action at all. Try answering your "what-ifs" to make them hold less power over you. For example, if you were to answer the question, "What if I get negative feedback from a teacher or supervisor?" you might say, "Well, I would feel upset, ashamed and I'd call my friend or loved one to talk it through. I'd probably do some self-soothing, and then try to improve my performance next time."

3. Shore up your resiliency

Anxiety is caused by overestimating risk and underestimating one's ability to cope with that risk. While you can help to manage thoughts that overestimate risk by trying some of the strategies above, you can also intentionally strengthen your coping toolbox and build resiliency. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from difficulties. Find more strategies for building resilience here so you can feel more prepared to cope with any outcome that might occur.

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4. Do the opposite

We can practice tolerating uncertainty by doing the opposite of any behaviors we typically do to control the discomfort. For example, if you find yourself repeatedly seeking reassurance, try to sit with the discomfort and not ask reassuring questions. If you tend to check and double-check your newsfeeds, lists or emails, try to turn off notifications or limit yourself to just one check per day. If you are not comfortable delegating tasks to others, do it anyway, and practice coping with the feeling of uncertainty. While it may feel uncomfortable at first, your mind will adjust with time, and you will prove to yourself that uncertainty may not be as bad as you once feared.

6. Focus on things you can control

Make a list of things that concern or worry you and divide them up into things you can control and things you cannot control. For example, we cannot control the global response to COVID-19, but we can practice good hand hygiene and appropriate physical distancing. We cannot personally stock store shelves with more paper towels, but we can consider alternative ways to conserve household resources. We cannot control when schools reopen, but we can come up with ways for our families to balance the needs of parents and children, even if that balance does not look the same as it did before school closures. We cannot control how our loved ones feel about quarantine, but we can support them with resources and ideas for coping with it. (Here's activity ideas for kids during stay at home orders, and tips for helping kids cope with COVID-19 stress.) By taking a more solution-oriented approach, we are able to accept the things we cannot change, while taking action on those we can.

5. Make progress on a skill or hobby

With stay at home orders still in effect, life can seem stagnant or unmoving. Without knowing a concrete timeline for things returning to normal, it can help us cope with uncertainty when we create progress and forward movement in other areas of our lives. Try an activity or hobby in which you can see progress and improvement:

- Start a garden
- Learn to cook
- Make some artwork
- Exercise
- Yoga and meditation
- Learn a new language
- Rearrange the furniture in your room
- Take an online class

By practicing the above tips and tricks, we can increase our ability to cope in times of uncertainty and feel strong enough to manage any outcome!

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Additional resources for coping with uncertainty:

Articles:

- [Building Your Tolerance for Uncertainty: Acting "As If"](#) — Anxiety Canada
- [Accepting Uncertainty](#) — Centre for Clinical Interventions

Helpline:

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA) Disaster Distress Helpline
  - Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990 (English and español)
  - SMS: Text TalkWithUs to 66746
  - SMS (español): "Hablanos" al 66746
  - TTY: 1-800-846-8517
  - Website — [English](#) | Website — [Español](#)

Helpful apps:

- **Woebot**: Your Self-Care Expert App, a cognitive behavior therapy-based artificial intelligence self-care app designed by psychologists at Stanford University
- **Headspace**: A mindfulness app for everyday life
- **Calm**: A sleep, meditation and relaxation app

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