



## **DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY**

(Adapted from: "A Learning Guide for UN Staff Members" - Francis de Riba)

### **DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY**

Our world is filled with uncertainty. Uncertainty of the future can produce anxiety or insecurity. It may mean people try to avoid situations they find stressful. It can make some people freeze and/or it can make them overreact to unfamiliar threats. On the positive side, uncertainty can keep people alert and inspire them to prepare for challenges, and to be careful when they are in unfamiliar surroundings. We can't control every aspect of life, but we can introduce a degree of certainty. This guide will provide you with information and simple self-help tips to deal successfully with uncertainty.

### **WHAT CAUSES UNCERTAINTY?**

It is normal for us to feel uncertainty when:

- details of situations are ambiguous, complex or unpredictable
- information is unavailable or inconsistent
- we feel insecure about our knowledge.

The feeling of uncertainty is primarily a self-perception based on one's own thoughts, therefore a person who believes himself/ herself to be uncertain **is** uncertain.

Causes of uncertainty include:

- Not knowing what will be required of you in the future
- Not knowing how to do a job
- Receiving vague or inconsistent instructions
- Not knowing how to manage others
- Not knowing what your manager or colleagues think of your abilities

### **RESPONSES TO UNCERTAINTY**

People have different responses when faced with uncertainty. Some may launch a "preemptive strike" and give up their goals rather than deal with the uncertainties inherent in their situation. Some will revise their plans and tell themselves they don't really want to pursue the things they actually desire. Some people will experience a kind of emotional paralysis when they feel they are living in the "no-man's land" of not knowing what the future holds for them. It may be hard to make long-range plans and to order other priorities when the future is so unknown.

## TIPS TO HELP YOU LIVE WITH UNCERTAINTY

Think realistically. How you feel and act is largely determined by the way you **think**, not by the things that happen to you nor by the actions of others.

| Strategy                    | How to...  |
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| Questioning                 | <p>Use the following steps and questions to help you arrive at a more rational and balanced appraisal of the situation</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Be aware of what you are saying to yourself. What is going through my mind? For example: "I'm petrified that a terrorist will blow up the building where I work."</li> <li>2. Challenge any fear-producing thoughts, perceptions or evaluations. Does this thought make any sense? Is it logical? Am I being realistic? Am I personalising the fear too much? Is there a clear and present danger? Have I received warning signals that support my fear? Is there a history or precedent to support the fear?</li> <li>3. Replace your negative thoughts with reinforcing self-statements. e.g. "Just because something could happen doesn't mean it will", "I'll focus on the present, which I can control, not on the future which I can't".</li> </ol>   |
| Possibility vs. Probability | <p>Make sure you don't confuse the concepts of possibility and probability. Possibility refers to the fact that a certain event can, in fact, take place, regardless of how slim the chances really are. Probability, on the other hand, refers to the likelihood that a certain event may occur beyond pure chance. For example, it is quite possible that while flying in an airplane, it could collide into another airplane or crash on landing. The chances of this happening, however, are slight. It could happen, but it probably won't. You need to make a distinction between legitimate concerns and appropriate worries, and those that are unrealistic and irrational. Avoid predicting that something bad will happen, just because you are uncertain.</p>   |
| Limit the problem           | <p>The level of anxiety can be correlated to the degree of uncertainty multiplied by the importance of the situation, i.e.</p> $\text{Uncertainty} \times \text{Importance} = \text{Level of Anxiety.}$ <p>In order to lower your level of anxiety you need to take a good look at the importance and uncertainty associated with the event. Try doing the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Generate ideas that will help you lower the uncertainty of the situation. This can be done by doing all you can to gain information. The more you know about a situation, the better you can prepare yourself to deal with it.</li> <li>2. After gathering as much information as you can, generate ideas that will make the event less important or stressful to you. For example, by altering the way you conceptualise the event you find stressful (viewing it as a "challenge" instead of a "threat," or an "opportunity" instead of a "crisis,") you can actually make it feel less threatening and stressful. If you can reduce either factor in the equation, you can help to reduce your level of anxiety.</li> </ol> |

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| Find reasons to be grateful for your situation | How do your problems compare to people who live in war-torn countries? How do your problems compare to people facing hunger and poverty. Reflect on these things and this may help to give you some perspective on your own challenges/problems.   |
| Increase your tolerance for the unknown        | Life is a continual process of facing the unknown. We live in a world of unknowns. Every moment is in some way new and unknown. If you resist the ambiguity of the moment ("I need to know"), you're going to create more ambiguity. Accept that your immediate future will inevitably entail many new situations and that uncertainty is bound to be present.   |
| Look at the world without fear                 | In truth, we are often more frightened than actual circumstances warrant. The absolute worst does not always happen. That is not to say the worst cannot happen, just that it usually doesn't. Anxiety may spring more from what we imagine will happen than from our external reality.  |
| Live your life fully                           | Focusing, as best you can, on living in the present, rather than worrying about an uncertain future can contribute to the richness of your experience. Try re-evaluating priorities so you will hopefully minimize the likelihood of regrets about what might have been. Also, try reminding yourself that life is all about risk and opportunity and that you can't have one without the other.   |
| Avoid obsessional thinking                     | Make a distinction between productive worry, which helps you to plan or motivate yourself, and non-productive worry, which mainly serves to make you miserable. When you worry needlessly, you overestimate the threat or risks associated with uncertainty, and you underestimate your resources for handling it. Remain calm and do not openly speculate on anxiety-producing events. Ask yourself whether there is really anything to worry about and if so, if your worry will be helpful in any realistic way. Over 95% of what we worry about never happens. |
| Avoid an information overload                  | Be aware of what's going on in the world, but don't be anxious about it. Be careful not to overload on Social Media information which feeds your feelings of anxiety.  |
| Learn acceptance                               | Basically, we can find ourselves in two types of unpleasant situations, ones we can change and ones we cannot change.<br>1. If you can change the situation, you should do something about it instead of getting upset. Not acting in such a situation will cause frustration in the end.<br>2. If you cannot change the situation, how can you help yourself to accept it. If you can't learn to accept it, this will lead to frustration and a negative and unpleasant state of mind, which may make the situation worse.  |
| Avoid catastrophising                          | In this frequently occurring irrational belief, you distort the magnitude and proportion of a situation or event and then exaggerate the importance and implications of that situation. Catastrophic thinking, such as "I will never get through it" creates a strong stress response. A more realistic thought might be "This is unpleasant, but I'll be able to cope."   |



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| Manage your health | Living with uncertainty can be draining and exhausting. It can diminish your energy levels/emotional resources and affect your ability to cope. So, do your best to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• get some regular exercise</li><li>• eat as healthily as you can</li><li>• manage the use of alcohol/ smoking</li><li>• get adequate sleep</li></ul> |
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## A CONCLUDING NOTE

Nothing in this world is for certain. We have to live our lives knowing that we cannot know for sure what will happen tomorrow. We can make our plans and construct our daily routines, but in the end, we can never know what tomorrow will bring. Consider the following story. Two sailors ran into each other in a pub. One told the other about his last voyage:

"After a month at sea, we discovered our masts had been eaten through by termites!"

"That's terrible," said the second sailor.

"That's what I thought, too," said the first sailor, "but it turned out to be good luck. As soon as we took the sails down to fix the masts, we were hit with a squall so suddenly and so hard, it would have blown us over if our sails were up at the time."

"How lucky!"

"That's exactly what I thought at the time, too. But because our sails were down, we couldn't steer ourselves and we were blown onto a reef. The hole in the hull was too big to fix. We were stranded."

"That is bad luck indeed."

"That's what I thought too when it first happened. But we all made it to the beach alive and had plenty to eat. And on the island, we discovered buried treasure!"

As the story illustrates, you don't often know if an event is "good" or "bad" except, perhaps, in retrospect, and, even then, you don't really know because life keeps on going. Just because something hasn't turned out to be an advantage yet doesn't mean it's not ever going to.

Therefore, one positive strategy is to assume that whatever happens is "good." If you think an event is good, it's easier to maintain a positive attitude. And your attitude affects your health, your energy level, the way people treat you, and how you treat others. A good attitude is a good thing. So, get into the habit of saying, "That's good!" As you don't know for sure whether something will eventually work to your advantage or not, you might as well assume it will. It is counterproductive to assume otherwise. If someone cuts you off on the road, say to yourself, "That's good!" They may have saved you from getting into an accident further along the road.

The truth is life is uncertain. So, the question becomes, what can you do in the face of the "certainty of uncertainty" to keep yourself as calm and positive as you can?

Find the techniques which work best for you...