

Dealing with Uncertainty



Uncertainty, whether we like it or not, is a fact of life. It is one of the few things that we can rely on. We encounter it in our personal relationships, in the workplace, in our climate, national and global events.

With recent political events resembling something akin to a Shakespearean drama, a revolving door of politicians and changes instigated by the EU referendum there has rarely been so much uncertainty about our future at a national level. Although many key decisions are thrashed out on the political playing field the changes and uncertainty has a ripple effect which trickles down to ordinary people as we try to anticipate what these changes will mean for us personally.

When we are unable to rely on the familiar and the predictable it is easy to lose our grounding. We can feel lost. Uncertainty

can lead to higher levels of anxiety, depression and unhealthy ways of coping. Having said that we always have a choice over how we respond to it, no matter how overwhelming it may seem. Even if there are things we cannot change there are many proactive choices we can make in our own lives.

If you would like to discuss anything raised in this helpsheet you can speak to one of our advisors on the CiC **24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline**. CiC also offer a workshop on Dealing with the Unexpected..

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The personal impact of uncertainty

Uncertainty, in whatever form – be it a potential restructure, a family illness, the threat of a move or any threat to familiar ways of living – causes stress and can trigger the ‘Fight or Flight’ response. When that happens stress hormones such as adrenaline are released into our blood stream, our blood pressure increases, our heart beats slightly faster and our muscles contract.

Sometimes symptoms are easy to spot. Panic attacks and depression won't affect everybody but they are a sign that something is very wrong. There is also a range of cumulative symptoms that can creep up on us without us realising what is going on. They can include:

Mental: forgetfulness, poor concentration, boredom, paranoia, perfectionism, over-thinking.

Physical: insomnia, indigestion, cramps, constipation, diarrhoea, sweatiness, sleeping too much, fatigue, headaches or back pain.

Emotional: irritability, depression, mood swings, apathy, increased sensitivity to criticism.

Relational: loneliness, withdrawal, intolerance, argumentativeness, relationship problems.

Behavioural: substance abuse, eating problems, overwork, procrastination.

Spiritual: sense of emptiness, loss of beliefs and sense of meaning, cynicism.

A Vicious Cycle

It is easy to get locked into a downward spiral if we don't find effective ways of coping with these difficulties.

When we feel stress it is tempting to reach for quick fix solutions such as drinking, smoking or over-eating. While these may provide short term relief the strain they put on our bodies actually causes more stress further down the line.

The more stressed we are the more we drink and smoke and ultimately we burn out.

People who are worried tend to sleep less. It may be because their minds are too busy, or that they have adopted habits that interfere with sleep – drinking, not exercising, staying up too late watching TV or browsing the internet in an effort to escape the anxiety. If disrupted sleep continues it can erode one's ability to think clearly and find effective ways forward.

A sense of hopelessness can also lead some to give up on some of the positive things that we do to make our lives better, such as going to the gym, healthy eating or making time for friends. If our relationships become strained, which often happens when couples find themselves under any kind of pressure, we may lose the very support that normally sustains us. By isolating we undermine our capacity to cope.

What can help?

Allow time to process and reflect. Many people catastrophise and panic in the face of change but it rarely helps. Engage your thinking whilst acknowledging your feelings to help guide you in what to do next. We all need time and space to think, but it is especially important when we feel anxious and panicky about life circumstances. Carving out time to reflect and process difficult episodes will help you to respond rather than react and may prove invaluable and save time later down the line.



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Be confident about your ability to cope. You may not know what lies ahead but we have all experienced adversity and found ways of surviving, and sometimes thriving. Look back through your history to remind yourself of challenging times and recall what you did in order to cope. Perhaps you retrained after a job loss, managed to settle in a new location, resolved a conflict with a friend, learned how to take better care of yourself after an illness or created a fulfilling life after a separation. When overwhelmed we often forget about the many strengths that we have; consciously identifying and remembering them can enable us to draw on them again. It reminds us that we can cope.

Focus on what you can control. Generally, we can choose to face the uncertainty and work out how we might change the situation or accept the uncertainty and think through how we can expand our capacity to cope. Having a sense of control even when being buffeted by life's challenges is possible when we engage in efficient thinking and see where we can take responsibility.

Instead of dwelling on a problem turn your attention to finding potential solutions. If you are someone who is stimulated by others, ask for help or even think about support groups or professional support if appropriate.

Even though circumstances may be out of your control there is always a choice about how you respond. For instance, if you are struggling with bill payments you can re-evaluate your budget and look at ways you can save money, explore opportunities to earn more or seek financial advice.

Accept difficult feelings and draw on your values. There is a simple model which is taken from Acceptance and Commitment therapy (ACT) which argues that, rather than fighting distress, we need to accept that it is a natural part of life and do what we need to do in spite of it:

- ▶ Accept whatever feelings arise in response to a situation.
- ▶ Choose a direction, or way forward, that is rooted in your values. To do this you must understand what your values are in relation to whatever situation you are confronted with.
- ▶ Take action. The action will be born out of your values.

Here is an example of how it can be used: Sam is setting up a design business and needs to forge new business contacts in order to find opportunities. However, Sam experiences anxiety when she meets new people. Using the ACT model she would accept and acknowledge that meeting new people brings anxiety; her values are that she believes in growing her business and to do so it is important to make new contacts. By acting on her values she decides to attend a networking event but she also accepts that she will feel some anxiety while she is there.

Use simple meditation or relaxation techniques.

Meditation has been proven to reduce stress and anxiety levels. Slow deep breathing - in through the nose and out through the mouth, with the belly soft and eyes closed - for several minutes each day can calm the Fight or Flight response. Don't worry if lots of thoughts arise, simply acknowledge them, let them go and refocus on your breath. There are many meditations and mindful exercises available on YouTube and online. Find one that you like if you prefer to be guided through an exercise.

Observe what calms and soothes you. Other ways of relaxing are going for a walk, being in nature, having a relaxing bath, doing yoga, listening to calming music, massage or doing something you enjoy.

Reach out to others. In times of adversity drawing strength from others can prove particularly valuable. Connect with those in a similar situation; often charities and the public sector have support in place for people going through stressful periods in their life. Sometimes we need people to really understand and empathise with our situation before we can look at how to move on.

Ditch the 'shoulds'. If you are so attached to your beliefs that things 'should' or 'must' be a certain way you will surely end up disappointed. Recognise which fixed ideas you are holding onto and try to be more flexible in your thinking and open to new and different possibilities.

Be patient. When things are uncertain it can take time before things settle down again. Our society conditions us to expect quick fixes and instant results but real life is not always like that. If you can allow the process to take time you will be less prone to frustration and stress.

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Use familiar routines. When things feel uncertain one way of helping ourselves to feel grounded again is to go through our familiar routines and rituals. This could be eating meals at regular times, walking the dog, our morning coffee, family TV time, reading before bed or whatever it is that makes life familiar. They may seem simple or trivial but they provide a sense of safety and consistency.

Take care of your body. Get plenty of sleep, eat a balanced diet and schedule time for exercise. Physical activity improves blood flow to the brain, helping you to think more clearly. It is also a great way to release endorphins, the body's natural painkillers and feel-good hormones. There is evidence that fit people are better able to handle the long-term effects of stress.

Further Resources

If you find that no matter what you do to try and look after yourself you are still feeling overwhelmed by uncertainty it may well be time to talk with a professional. A safe space to talk to

someone who can listen impartially often makes a significant difference.

CiC workshop - Dealing with the Unexpected

Anxiety UK – charity which supports people suffering from anxiety – www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Reading

Embracing Uncertainty

by Susan Jeffers

Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities

by Rebecca Solnit

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