

3 research-based ways to cope with the uncertainties of pandemic life

23 September 2020, by Bethany Teachman



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It's 1:36 a.m. and I've just gotten my daughter back to sleep after she threw up violently. She has no fever, no cough, no shortness of breath, but what if.... I think it's food poisoning and not COVID-19, but I can't know for sure. Not knowing is hard. I'll call the pediatrician in the morning, but for tonight I'm left with racing "what if" thoughts.

Most people hate this all-too-familiar type of uncertainty. I find it fascinating.

[As a psychologist](#), I'm interested in how people think differently when they're anxious. That means I study what happens when people don't handle uncertainty well and get lost in that bottomless pit of currently unanswerable questions.

If you're having trouble handling pandemic uncertainty, psychology research can offer tips on how to deal with these unprecedented times.

The uncertainty-anxiety connection

There's no script to follow for how to live through a pandemic. That can be hard to deal with because it's natural to form narratives to help you know how

to respond. In a movie theater, you know that when it gets dark, it means the movie is about to start—that movie theater script tells you not to panic and think the theater has lost power or is under attack.

In this moment, we are figuratively in the dark, and many people feel they're drowning in unanswered questions and the anxiety they provoke.

When will a vaccine be available? When will schools reopen (or close again)? Who will win the election? Should I let my child do sports? Is my job safe, or for those less fortunate, when will I find a new job? How many more times will I see "your connection is unstable" during an important video call?

The list of unanswered questions can feel infinite, with no quick or sure answers likely to come for some time. Sitting with these questions is scary, because not knowing can make you feel that the world is unpredictable and your fate is out of your control.

So, what do you do with the [anxiety this uncertainty naturally evokes](#)?

If you get stuck replaying the unanswered questions over and over and let anxiety guide your thinking, you're likely to fill in the gaps with worst-case scenarios. A tendency to catastrophize and [assign negative and threatening interpretations](#) when situations are uncertain or ambiguous is a hallmark of anxiety disorders. In fact, "intolerance of uncertainty," the tendency to fear the unknown and find the lack of certainty highly distressing and uncomfortable, is a [strong predictor of anxiety in both adults](#) and [children and adolescents](#).

Given that COVID-19, the economy, racial injustice, [climate change](#) and the presidential election all take the need to tolerate uncertainty to a whole new level, it's not surprising that the percentage of

people reporting [symptoms of anxiety rose dramatically](#) in the U.S. in 2020.

Stop spiraling and think differently

No individual can fix all the problems American communities are facing right now. And answers to many of those known unknowns and unknown unknowns are elusive for the moment. But you can change the way you respond to uncertainty, which can make managing this difficult time a little easier.

You can reframe the meaning of not knowing to make it less scary.

Imagine three different ways I can think about the uncertainty I feel right now as my sick daughter sleeps down the hall.

First, I can choose to believe in my ability to manage whatever will come, so it is OK to take it a day at a time. I can handle not knowing exactly why my daughter threw up for now because I believe that I will seek appropriate medical care and that I can handle whatever results come my way.

Second, I can remind myself that uncertainty does not guarantee bad things will happen; it just means I don't know yet. The anxiety I feel from the uncertainty does not actually mean a negative outcome is more likely. The fact that I'm worrying about whether my daughter has COVID-19 does not increase the likelihood of her having it. It just feels that way because of a common tendency, especially among [anxious individuals](#), to think that just having a negative thought makes it more likely to come true. Psychologists call this [thought-action-fusion](#).

Third, I can recognize that I cope with uncertainty in other parts of life all the time. I mean, try to envision exactly what your relationships and work will look like one year from now—there is so much you just don't know. So I've had lots of practice tolerating uncertainty, which tells me I can handle uncertainty even though it's hard. I've done it before; I can do it again.

Thinking differently about your ability to manage uncertainty is a skill that can improve with practice.

[Cognitive behavior therapy](#), for example, teaches people to examine their anxious thoughts and consider other ways to interpret situations without always assuming the worst; there are specialized versions of this treatment that focus specifically on [changing how well you can deal with uncertainty](#). Moreover, as part of our research program, my lab at the University of Virginia offers [free online interventions](#) to help people shift their anxious thinking.

Of course, a fourth way to respond to my middle-of-the-night uncertainty would be to sink down into that pit of scary, unanswerable "what if" questions, but it's time to sleep. I'm going with one of the first three options—I trust I can figure this out in the morning and handle whatever it is. It's OK not to know right now.

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