[anxiety](#)

Dealing with Uncertainty

Life is filled with uncertainty and worries about the future. While many things remain outside your control, your mindset is key to coping with difficult circumstances and confidently facing the unknown.

The role of uncertainty in life

Uncertainty is all around us, never more so than today. Whether it concerns a global pandemic, the economy, or your finances, health, and relationships, much of what lies ahead in life remains uncertain. Yet as human beings, we crave security. We want to feel safe and have a sense of control over our lives and well-being. Fear and uncertainty can leave you

feeling stressed, anxious, and powerless over the direction of your life. It can drain you emotionally and trap you in a downward spiral of endless "what-ifs" and worst-case scenarios about what tomorrow may bring.

We're all different in how much uncertainty we can tolerate in life. Some people seem to enjoy taking risks and living unpredictable lives, while others find the randomness of life deeply distressing. But all of us have a limit. If you feel overwhelmed by uncertainty and worry, it's important to know that you're not alone; many of us are in the same boat. It's also important to realize that no matter how helpless and hopeless you feel, there are steps you can take to better deal with uncontrollable circumstances, alleviate your anxiety, and face the unknown with more confidence.

Learning to cope with uncertainty

While we may not wish to acknowledge it, uncertainty is a natural and unavoidable part of life. Very little about our lives is constant or totally certain, and while we have control over many things, we can't control everything that happens to us. As the coronavirus pandemic demonstrated, life can change very quickly and very unpredictably. One day things may be just fine, the next you've suddenly become sick, lost your job, or found yourself struggling to put food on the table or provide for your family.

To cope with all this uncertainty, many of us use worrying as a tool for trying to predict the future and avoid nasty surprises. Worrying can make it seem like you have some control over uncertain circumstances. You may believe that it will help you find a solution to your problems or prepare you for the worst. Maybe if you just agonize over a problem long enough, just think through every possibility, or read every opinion online, you'll find a solution and be able to control the outcome. Unfortunately, none of this works. Chronic worrying can't give you more control over uncontrollable events; it just robs you of enjoyment in the present, saps your energy, and keeps you up at night. But there are healthier ways to cope with uncertainty—and that begins with adjusting your mindset.

[Read: How to Stop Worrying]

The following tips can help you to:

- Focus on controlling those things that are under your control.
- Challenge your need for certainty.
- Learn to better tolerate, even embrace, the inevitable uncertainty of life.
- Reduce your anxiety and stress levels.

Tip 1: Take action over the things you can control

Much about life is uncertain at the moment—and many things remain outside of your control. But while you can't control the spread of a virus, the recovery of the economy, or whether you'll have a pay check next week, you're not totally powerless. Whatever your fears or personal circumstances, instead of worrying about the uncontrollable, try to refocus your mind on taking action over the aspects that are within your control.

For example, if you've lost your job or income during this difficult time, you still have control over how much energy you put into searching online for work, sending out resumes, or networking with your contacts. Similarly, if you're worried about your health or a recent diagnosis, for example, you can still take action by lowering your stress levels, reaching out to loved ones for support, and managing your symptoms.

By focusing on the aspects of a problem that you can control in this way, you'll switch from ineffective worrying and ruminating into active problem-solving. Of course, all circumstances are different and you may find that in some situations all you can control is your attitude and emotional response.

[Read: Coping with a Life-Threatening Illness or Serious Health Event]

Actively deal with your emotions

When circumstances are out of your control, it's easy to become overwhelmed by fear and negative emotions. You may think that bottling up how you feel, trying to put on a brave face, or forcing yourself to be positive will provide the best outcome. But denying or suppressing your emotions will only increase stress and anxiety and make you more vulnerable to depression or burnout.

When you can do nothing else about a situation, you can still actively face up to your emotions—even the most negative and fearful ones. Allowing yourself to experience uncertainty in this way can help you reduce stress, better come to terms with your circumstances, and find a sense of peace as you deal with challenges.

Tip 2: Challenge your need for certainty

While uncertainty and change are inescapable parts of life, we often adopt behaviors to try to cope with the discomfort they can bring. In addition to worrying through every possible

scenario, you may:

Excessively seek reassurance from others. You repeatedly ask friends or loved ones if you're making the right decision, endlessly research information online, or seek out expert advice in an effort to remove uncertainty from your life.

Micromanage people. You refuse to delegate tasks to others, either at work or home. You may even try to force people around you to change, to make their behavior more predictable for you.

Procrastinate. By not making decisions, you hope to avoid the uncertainty that inevitably follows. You'll find ways to delay or postpone acting—or even avoid certain situations all together—in an attempt to prevent bad things from happening.

Repeatedly check things. You call or text your family, friends, or kids again and again to make sure they're safe. You check and re-check emails, texts, or forms before sending, double-check lists to ensure you haven't missed anything that could have repercussions on the predictability of the future.

How to challenge these behaviors

You can challenge the behaviors you've adopted to alleviate the discomfort of uncertainty by asking yourself the following questions:

1. **What are the advantages of certainty? What are the disadvantages?**Life can change in a moment and it is filled with unexpected events and surprises—but that's not always a bad thing. For every unpleasant surprise, such as a traffic accident or serious medical diagnosis, there are good things that happen out of the blue as well—a dream job offer, a surprise pay rise, or an unexpected phone call from an old friend. Opportunity often arises from the unexpected and having to face uncertainty in life can also help you learn to adapt, overcome challenges, and increase your resiliency. It can help you to grow as a person.
2. **How much can you be absolutely certain about in life?**Does anyone have a job for life, a guarantee of good health, or absolute certainty over what tomorrow will bring? Behaviors such as worrying, micromanaging, and procrastinating offer the illusion of having some control over a situation, but what do they change in reality? The truth is no matter how much you try to plan and prepare for every possible outcome, life will find a way of surprising you. All striving for certainty really does is fuel worry and anxiety.

3. **Do you assume bad things will happen just because an outcome is uncertain? What is the likelihood they will?** When you're faced with uncertainty, it's easy to overestimate the likelihood of something bad happening—and underestimate your ability to cope if it does. But given that the likelihood of something bad happening is low, even in these precarious times, is it possible to live with that small chance and focus instead on the more likely outcomes? Ask your friends and family how they cope with uncertainty in specific circumstances. Could you do the same?

By challenging your need for certainty, you can begin to let go of negative behaviors, reduce stress and worry, and free up time and energy for more practical purposes.

Tip 3: Learn to accept uncertainty

No matter how much you strive to eliminate doubt and volatility from your life, the truth is you already accept a lot of uncertainty every day. Each time you cross a street, get behind the wheel of a car, or eat takeout or restaurant food you're accepting a level of uncertainty. You're trusting that the traffic will stop, you won't have an accident, and everything you're eating is safe.

The chances of something bad happening in these circumstances is small, so you accept the risk and move on without requiring certainty. If you're religious, you also likely accept some doubt and uncertainty as part of your faith.

When [irrational fears](#) and worries take hold, it can be hard to think logically and accurately weigh up the probability of something bad happening. To help you become more tolerant and accepting of uncertainty, the following steps can help:

Identify your uncertainty triggers. A lot of uncertainty tends to be self-generated, through excessive worrying or a pessimistic outlook, for example. However, some uncertainty can be generated by external sources, especially at times like this. Reading media stories that focus on worst-case scenarios, spending time on [social media](#) amid rumors and half-truths, or simply communicating with anxious friends can all fuel your own fears and uncertainties. That's the reason why so many people start panic-buying when bad news breaks—they see others doing it and it feeds their own fears. By recognizing your triggers, you can take action to avoid or reduce your exposure to them.

Recognize when you feel the need for certainty. Notice when you start to feel anxious and fearful about a situation, begin to worry about what-ifs, or feel like a situation is far worse than it actually is. Look for the physical cues that you're feeling anxious. You might

notice the tension in your neck or shoulders, shortness of breath, the onset of a headache, or an empty feeling in your stomach. Take a moment to pause and recognize that you're craving reassurance or a guarantee.

[Read: Anxiety Disorders and Anxiety Attacks]

Allow yourself to feel the uncertainty. Instead of engaging in futile efforts to gain control over the uncontrollable, let yourself experience the discomfort of uncertainty. Like all emotions, if you allow yourself to feel fear and uncertainty, they will eventually pass. Focus on the present moment and your breathing and allow yourself to simply feel and observe the uncertainty you're experiencing. Take some slow, deep breaths or try a meditation to keep you anchored in the present.

Listen to HelpGuide's Coping with Uncertainty meditation.

Let go. Respond to the what-ifs running through your head by acknowledging that you're not a fortune teller; you don't know what will happen. All you can do is let go and accept the uncertainty as part of life.

Shift your attention. Focus on solvable worries, taking action on those aspects of a problem that you can control, or simply go back to what you were doing. When your mind wanders back to worrying or the feelings of uncertainty return, refocus your mind on the present moment and your own breathing.

Accepting uncertainty doesn't mean not having a plan

Accepting uncertainty doesn't mean you shouldn't have a plan for some of life's unforeseen circumstances. It's always good to have some savings put by in case of unexpected expenses, keep a preparedness kit handy if you live in an area at risk for earthquakes or hurricanes, or have a plan if you or a loved one falls ill. But you can't prepare for every possible scenario. Life is simply too random and unpredictable.

Tip 4: Focus on the present

Uncertainty is often centered on worries about the future and all the bad things you can anticipate happening. It can leave you feeling hopeless and depressed about the days ahead,

exaggerate the scope of the problems you face, and even paralyze you from taking action to overcome a problem.

One of the surest ways to avoid worrying about the future is to focus on the present. Instead of trying to predict what might happen, switch your attention to what's happening right now. By being fully connected to the present, you can interrupt the negative assumptions and catastrophic predictions running through your mind.

You can learn to purposely focus your attention on the present through [mindfulness](#). With regular practice, mindfulness can help change your preoccupation with future worries to a stronger appreciation of the present moment—as well as help calm your mind, ease stress, and boost your overall mood.

You can start a mindfulness practice by following an [audio meditation](#) or incorporating it into an exercise program, such as [walking](#). Using mindfulness to stay focused on the present can take perseverance. Initially, you may find that your focus keeps wandering back to your future fears and worries—but keep at it. Each time you focus your attention back on the present, you're strengthening a new mental habit that can help you break free of uncertainty.

Tip 5: Manage stress and anxiety

Taking steps to reduce your overall stress and anxiety levels can help you interrupt the downward spiral of negative thoughts, find inner calm, and better cope with the uncertainty in your life.

Get moving. [Exercise is a natural and effective stress-reliever and anti-anxiety treatment](#). Try adding a mindfulness element and focusing on how your body feels as you move. Pay attention to the sensation of your feet hitting the ground as you walk, run, or dance, for example, or the rhythm of your breathing, or the feeling of the sun or wind on your skin.

Make time for relaxation. Choose a [relaxation technique](#) such as meditation, yoga, or [deep breathing](#) exercises and try to set aside time each day for regular practice.

Get plenty of sleep. Excessive worry and uncertainty can disturb your sleep—just as a lack of quality sleep can fuel anxiety and stress. Improving your daytime habits and taking time to relax and unwind before bed can help you to [sleep better at night](#).

Eat a healthy diet. Eating [healthy meals](#) can help maintain your energy levels and prevent

mood swings. Avoid sugary and processed foods and try to add more omega-3 fats—from salmon, walnuts, soybeans, and flaxseeds—to give your overall mood a boost.

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