

Psychologist Shares the Best (and Worst) Ways to Deal with Uncertainty

Here's how to cope—and take back some control—when faced with an ambiguous future.

Real Simple
By [Maggie Seaver](#)

Uncertainty, lack of control, a shortage of answers—these nebulous unknowns, whether sweeping or mundane, are natural and very normal catalysts for anxiety. Biology is responsible for the unpleasantness we feel in times of uncertainty—and with the best of intentions, believe it or not.



“When we don’t have enough information about the future—when things are uncertain—it makes perfect sense to be anxious,” says Amelia Aldao, PhD, a clinical psychologist in New York City and the founder of [Together CBT](#), a clinic specializing in group therapy for anxiety, OCD, stress, and depression.

“Anxiety makes us worry about the future so that we can plan for scenarios. It increases our vigilance of our surroundings and engages the fight-or-flight response in case we need to defend ourselves physically,” she says, adding that “it’s perfectly normal to feel anxious when things are uncertain.”

Uncertainty Affects Everyone, Just Differently

Uncertainty is anxiety-inducing for everyone, but not everyone is affected on the same scale. Aldao points to research (like [this study](#) and [this study](#)) demonstrating that people with anxiety also tend to have a lower threshold, or tolerance, for coping with uncertainty. Less anxious people, then, may have a higher threshold for accepting the unknown and managing their reaction to uncertain times.

Think about it. People diagnosed with anxiety or with a tendency to worry might find a social gathering daunting because of the innate uncertainty of the occasion. Who will be there? What will everyone else be wearing (so I can dress accordingly)? How long will it last? Will I say something awkward? Will it be fun? How are we getting home?

On the other hand, someone less prone to anxiety isn't bothered by the uncertainty here: Who cares? We'll find out when we get there; I'm going with the flow. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are those who relish in the unknown. Their thought process might include: I wonder who will be there! Can't wait to see what everyone's wearing—and for them to see what I'm wearing! Who knows where we'll end up or how we'll get home! It's thrilling, open-ended, filled with possibility.

The unknowns of the above hypothetical party are enough to trigger anxiety alarms for the habitually anxious—while others need larger, more existential or higher-stakes uncertainties in order for their anxiety switch to flip (like the death of a loved one or a job layoff).

No one way of reacting is correct; they're simply different. However, Aldao notes a turning point to watch out for: "The problem arises when the magnitude of our anxiety response is out of proportion with how uncertain things truly are."

Yes, anxiety is our organic coping mechanism for a lack of control and information. But at a certain point, over-the-top anxiety about something we'd never be able to control or account for is unhelpful and even harmful.

Anxiety and Uncertainty in the Time of Coronavirus

This time of unprecedented uncertainty as we collectively fight the spread of coronavirus, for example, is powerful enough to set even the least-anxious person on edge. To reiterate: What you are feeling right now is completely standard.

"When things in the world change such that uncertainty increases (like right now), everyone's anxiety level (regardless of where they were) tend to go up," Aldao. "For

some people this will look like an exacerbation of an existing anxiety disorder, and for others it might mean developing one for the first time.”

The good news is there are methods of dealing with these nagging feelings of dread. We can’t stop hurricanes, bad news, pandemics, or the clock; but it helps to focus on what you can control—yourself.

Techniques for Coping with Uncertainty (Now and Always)

1. Identify (and tune out) unproductive worrying

“Productive worries tend to lead to actions that give us more control of our environment, whereas unproductive worries make us feel even more anxious and uncertain (thus leading to a vicious cycle),” Aldao explains.

With this in mind, try to differentiate how much of your worrying is productive (making sure there’s enough food in the house) versus unproductive (staying up all night thinking about worst case scenarios). If there’s nothing you can do about it, it’s not yours to worry over.

Something to note: Simply “tuning out” worrisome thoughts is not easy, especially for a very anxious person. That said, the act of taking a step back and recognizing what is and isn’t worth the worry can be a helpful first step.

2. Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness is active and intentional awareness. You can exercise mindfulness when simply sitting at the kitchen table eating your lunch: Feel the chair under your butt; appreciate the texture of the food as you chew; note the sensation of going from hungry to satisfied. It’s not easy, but it’s incredibly powerful. To hone the skill, you can [practice mindfulness more formally through mindfulness](#)

[meditation](#), which trains you to better manage racing thoughts and stay grounded and present when troubling uncertainty abounds.

3. Develop habits and routines for a sense of control

The current circumstances have disrupted everyone's normal routine in large ways and small, and much of the uncertainty comes from the lack of an end date to all the [social distancing](#) and health threats. But we can create our own routines that give us structure and control on a smaller, more individual scale. There is no right or wrong routine, but choosing a few things and sticking to them help more than you realize. Aldao suggests holding yourself accountable with things like daily exercise, changing out of pajamas, or [trying out new cooking recipes](#).

“Habits become automatic and give us a sense of predictability and control,” she says. “Also, because we tend to feel accomplished when we complete a task, they're boosters that can help fight off low moods.”

The notion goes beyond coronavirus concerns, too. In any moment of uncertainty, the same applies. Maybe you ended a relationship and feel aimless and confused about the future; or moved across the country for a job and don't know a soul. Not knowing how things will pan out is scary, but some structure and setting small, attainable goals can be powerful pillars to keep you going.

“In my practice, I've been particularly emphasizing setting up an activity calendar (for work and fun stuff) and sticking to it as much as possible—even if you don't feel like it and would rather crash on the couch,” Aldao says. “This is based on a cognitive behavioral therapy technique called ‘behavioral activation,’ an evidence-based approach for treating depression and low mood.”

4. Focus on gratitude

It's remarkable how gratitude can transform anxiety. "Finding the silver lining in a new reality is super important," Aldao says. You may not always know the why, how, and when of things, but you can reframe your perspective by acknowledging unexpected upsides and being thankful for what you do have. During this quarantine, for example: more time with loved ones, no more train commute, or empty weekends to dive into that stack of books.

5. Seek out humor

"Whether it's a TV show, funny Tweets, or a group chat with friends, humor is very much about the here-and-now," Aldao says. "The more we're in that head space, the less our minds travel to the future and remind us of how uncertain it is."

6. Don't rely on temporary distractions

It's unhealthy to fill the void left by feelings of uncertainty with escapist behaviors like excessive drinking, using drugs, engaging in emotional eating, or denying there's a problem. Denial, or avoidance, is one extreme response (the other is over engaging).

7. Accept what you can't control

This is easier said than done, admittedly, but acceptance is a big step toward regaining peace of mind. Paradoxically, obsessive consumption of information—grasping for certainty—can make things worse. "Acknowledging that we can't control and change everything is extremely important," Aldao says. "Wanting to know and control everything fuels uncertainty. Seeking out information is vital, and keeping up with news is important—but constantly refreshing your news and social media feeds only adds to anxiety."