

How to Tolerate Uncertainty

Dealing with uncertainty is an unavoidable part of daily life. Because we can't see the future, we can never be certain about what exactly is going to happen day-to-day. Research has found that people vary in their ability to tolerate uncertainty. That is, some people are okay with having a lot of uncertainty in their lives, and other people cannot stand even a small amount of uncertainty.

Anxious people, particularly those adults who worry excessively, are more likely to be very intolerant of uncertainty. They will often try to plan and prepare for everything as a way of avoiding or eliminating uncertainty.

What's wrong with being intolerant of uncertainty?

Obviously, it is normal, and even common, for most people to be a bit uncomfortable with uncertainty. We prefer to know that the restaurant we are going to serves food that we like, that at the party we were invited to there will be people we know, and that our boss tells us exactly what he thinks about our work performance. This knowledge feels more comfortable to us than not knowing anything about the restaurant we are going to, being unsure about who will be at the party, and not knowing whether our boss thinks we are doing a good or a bad job.

Uncertainty as an allergy...

Being intolerant of uncertainty is a lot like having an allergy; if you are allergic to pollen for example, what happens when you are exposed to even a small amount of it? You will sneeze and cough, and your eyes will probably get red and teary. When people who are intolerant of uncertainty are exposed to a little bit of uncertainty, they also have a strong reaction: they worry and do everything they can think of to get away from, avoid, or eliminate the uncertainty.



But being extremely intolerant of uncertainty can cause problems, since the intolerance can lead to a lot of time-consuming and tiring behaviours, cause stress and anxiety, and serve as the major fuel for worry.

What do people who are intolerant of uncertainty do?

If you can't stand having uncertainty in your life, you are probably doing things that are designed to either remove all uncertainty in daily life situations or you are outright avoiding uncertain situations. Some of the behaviours that people do when they are intolerant of uncertainty include:

- **Seeking excessive reassurance from others:** This might be asking friends or family for their opinion on a decision that you have to make.
- **List-making:** As a way of eliminating uncertainty, some people will make long and detailed “to-do” lists, sometimes several lists every day.
- **Double-checking:** For example, calling loved ones repeatedly to “make sure” that they are okay, or re-reading emails several times to check that they are perfect and that there are no spelling mistakes.
- **Refusing to delegate tasks to others:** Many people who are intolerant of uncertainty will not allow anyone either at work or at home to do certain tasks; this is because they cannot be “sure” that it will be done correctly unless they do it.
- **Procrastination/avoidance:** Because being uncertain can cause anxiety, some people simply procrastinate or avoid people, places, or situations. If you do not do something, then you don't have to feel uncertain.
- **Distraction:** Those who are intolerant of uncertainty often keep themselves “busy” most of the day so that they don't have the time to think about all of life's uncertainty.

You probably noticed that these behaviours all require a lot of time and energy. Needing to be certain about everything can often take the fun out of life, as surprises/unexpected events become something threatening. Also, if you avoid or procrastinate, you may miss out on a lot of good opportunities in life simply because of a dislike of uncertainty.

Remember:

Unless you can see the future, you will always be uncertain about some things.



Another problem with intolerance of uncertainty...

If you can't stand uncertainty and do everything you can to get rid of it, you might have noticed a problem... it is **IMPOSSIBLE** to get rid of all uncertainty in your life.

What this means for you is that all the work you are doing to get rid of uncertainty is useless; **it just does not work!** If it did, you would probably not be struggling with anxiety and worry.

So, what is the solution?

Well, if you can't get rid of uncertainty in your life, then the only way to manage your intolerance of uncertainty is by learning to be more **TOLERANT of uncertainty**.

How can I learn to become more tolerant?

Obviously, even if you agree that being more tolerant of uncertainty would be helpful, it is not so easy to just change an attitude. However, cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) shows us that our thoughts, feelings, and actions are all interconnected, and that if you change one, you can change the others (see [What is CBT?](#) for more details).

Using CBT, we know that the best way to learn to become more tolerant of uncertainty is to start acting “as if” you are tolerant of uncertainty. This means that **changing your behaviour** around uncertainty will eventually help you to **change your thoughts and feelings** around uncertainty.

Learning to act “as if”

Step 1: Make a List of Behaviours

Start by writing down all the things you do to try to feel more certain, or to get around or avoid uncertainty. You can use the sample of behaviours listed above as a guide.

- For example:
 - Do you seek reassurance from others?
 - Do you do a lot of double-checking?
 - Do you look for a great deal of information before making a decision?
 - Do you procrastinate a lot?
 - Are there situations that you avoid?



A good way to compose this list is to be a detective in your daily life: notice when you are feeling anxious, and what it is that you do to try to feel less anxious. For example, if you have to buy a present for someone and you start to feel anxious about what to buy, what do you do? Do you call your friends and ask for advice about what to get? This reassurance-seeking behaviour can then go on your list.

Step 2: Rank Them According to Anxiety

If you want to start acting “as if” you are tolerant of uncertainty, it is best to start small. That way, you are more likely to do it, and to succeed. If you pick something too difficult, you might be unable to do it, and you probably won’t want to try it again.

With this in mind, look at the behaviours you do that might be easier to try to change. You can then rank your behaviours on a scale from 0 (no anxiety at all) to 10 (extreme anxiety) by imagining how anxious you would become if you could not do them.

Here is an example:

Behaviours to Reduce Uncertainty	Anxiety Level (0-10)
Delegating important tasks at work to others, without checking up on how it was done	10
Not calling kids on their cell phones when they are out with their friends	8
Going out with friends and letting them make all the plans	6
Going to the grocery store without a shopping list	4
Sending an email without checking for spelling mistakes	3
Going to a movie without knowing anything about it	2

Step 3: Practice Tolerating Uncertainty

Once you have a list of behaviours that you do to reduce or avoid uncertainty, then start picking small items that you can do to practice tolerating uncertainty. Try to do at least three things a week.

For example, you might try going to a restaurant and ordering a meal that you have never tried, and then you might send a few emails without checking them first (and no cheating! Don’t send the email to yourself as well so that you can check it later...).



Step 4: Write it Down!

Keep a record of all the times you were acting “as if” you were tolerating uncertainty.

- Write down:
 - What you did
 - How you felt while doing it (was it harder or easier than you thought?)
 - What happened (did everything turn out okay?)
 - If it did not turn out as planned, what did you do?

If you write things down, you will be able to see all the work that you did in facing uncertainty, and as you keep practicing, you will see how things that you once thought were difficult in the beginning are now much easier.

Step 5: Record What Happened

If you are taking some risks and are not 100% certain in your life, there is the chance that things will not go perfectly. For example, if you tolerate uncertainty and go to a movie without reading a review, you might not like the movie. If you go grocery shopping without a list, you might come home and realize that you forgot something.

When you allow some uncertainty in your life, sometimes things go wrong! For this reason, it is important to write down the outcome of your tolerating-uncertainty exercises, and what you did to cope. For example, if you forgot an item from the grocery store, what did you do? Did you pick it up the next day or go back to the store? How horrible was the outcome?

- Ask yourself the following questions:
 - Did things turn out okay even though I was not 100% certain?
 - If things did not turn out okay, what happened?
 - What did I do to cope with the negative outcome?
 - Was I able to handle the negative outcome?
 - What does this tell me about my ability to cope with negative outcomes in the future?

REMEMBER: Sometimes things will not go exactly as planned if you allow some uncertainty into your life. But this is not a sign of failure on your part. Most people who tolerate uncertainty learn that even if bad things happen, they can cope with them.



It is also important to realize that even when you were trying to make everything certain, things often still didn't always work out. It just took a whole lot more energy and time trying to be certain. By becoming more tolerant of uncertainty, you get to let go of all of the problems associated with being intolerant, and you get to realize that you can deal with things, even when they don't go perfectly.

Step 6: Build Momentum!

When you feel comfortable with the small steps that you have taken to tolerate uncertainty, gradually try more difficult things.

Look for opportunities to tolerate uncertainty in daily life. For example, if someone asks you to pick up a bottle of wine for a party, try going to the store and buying a bottle without asking for anyone's advice.

As you start acting more and more "as if" you are comfortable with uncertainty, it will get easier and become a part of your life. Think of it like building a muscle; you need to do your exercises every day if you want that muscle to get strong!

SUMMARY

By practicing small steps to embrace uncertainty, you can reduce anxiety and gain confidence in your ability to handle life's unpredictability. Learning to tolerate uncertainty takes time, but every step forward strengthens your resilience.

Find more Anxiety Canada resources [here](#). Thank you to Anxiety Canada's Registered Clinical Counsellor and Clinical Educator, Mark Antczak, for reviewing this resource in 2022.