

Tolerating Uncertainty

Objective: To expand the scope of your life by increasing your tolerance of uncertainty.

You Should Know

Uncertainty is an unavoidable part of life. No one can predict the future, so we must all learn to accept that there is some degree of uncertainty in everyday life—and that in certain situations there is a great deal of uncertainty.

Most people simply accept uncertainty as a natural part of life, but people with anxiety disorders find it hard to accept uncertainty, particularly in certain situations. For people who worry too much, the uncertainty of certain situations can act as a magnifier for their worries, feelings of anxiety, and even physical problems associated with stress.

Most people with anxiety disorders try to avoid situations that will increase their awareness of the uncertainty in life. They may avoid traveling, changing jobs, and even meeting new people. Some people avoid going to the doctor for a checkup because just making an appointment triggers their worry that something might be wrong with their health.

Avoiding situations that trigger your uncertainty will only diminish your life and narrow your choices. However, with practice, you can learn to accept aspects of life that are ambiguous or uncertain and cause you to worry unnecessarily.

What to Do

This worksheet is designed to teach you a simple process that can help you deal with uncertainty. The acronym APPLIES will help you remember the mindfulness skills you need when you are uncomfortable with uncertainty.

Acknowledge. Notice and simply observe uncertainty as it enters into your awareness.

Pause. Choose to respond, rather than react, to your experience. In fact, let go of the impulse to react altogether. Put your mind on “pause,” and breathe calmly.

Pull back. Remind yourself that in this moment, it is fear, anxiety, or worry doing the talking. Thoughts and emotions are not facts. Notice that the need for certainty is not effective and is an impossible quest.

Let go. Give yourself permission to release yourself from the illusory need for certainty. No matter how intensely or loudly your thoughts and emotions may insist that you need certainty, remember that the intensity of these thoughts and emotions are temporary and will pass.

Explore. Take a moment to explore your internal experience. Pay attention to your breathing and to all your senses. Observe the sensations around you: the sights, the sounds, the smells, the taste, and what you are touching. The emotional intensity associated with your distress will likely lessen as you do this. Now, choose to actively redirect your attention toward something different from what you are worrying about. Be present in your life.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

What else can you do to make progress in this area?
