

MANAGING UNCERTAINTY: FIVE SIMPLE SOLUTIONS



of uncertainty (i.e., good tactics). Staying calm means controlling the intensity of your negative emotions: anxiety, fear, anger, grief, sadness, rage, helplessness, alienation, cynicism, and the feeling that you have no future. When these emotions are not controlled, they impede your ability to think clearly and to process the information and facts around you in an effective and organized fashion.

Staying calm is a way of taming your emotional brain so that your executive, logical brain can rationally assess the facts in the present and plan your actions to be the most effective for your day-to-day living. The payoff for staying calm in the face of uncertainty is that you are able to see your options and choices more clearly and thus make the right choices. Staying calm enables you to ignore matters that could intrude and hinder you from achieving your goals. Here, we are referring to distractions that create noise and more anxiety.

The costs of not staying calm in the face of generalized uncertainty involve damaging your health, family life, effectiveness on the job, and the possibility of ending up feeling miserable and hopeless. When uncertainty in daily life is not effectively managed, your body may become a dumping ground for negative emotions, and you may experience a variety of bothersome physical symptoms. This negative mental and physical state is not conducive to maintaining personal security and assuring survival.

In addition, ineffective management of ongoing generalized uncertainty can lead to a chronic sense of feeling

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If you want to give God a good laugh, tell him your plans.

— Old Yiddish folk saying

Who knows what the world will be like five years from now, let alone in twenty years? The only thing we know for sure is that change and uncertainty will continue, and that those who know how to adjust to change and uncertainty will live more comfortably and successfully. Unfortunately, the life skills you need for coping with change and uncertainty are not taught in school.

Uncertainty is an ever-present issue, as is the need to cope with it. This has always been so and probably always will be so. For many people, it is often the cumulative stress of the small hassles of daily life that gets to them, or contributes to their eventual ill health by precipitating stress-related disorders.

Uncertainty is a condition in which you lack knowledge or confidence about what will happen to you in your daily life as it relates to your job, financial security, health, wellness, shelter, family, and safety on a personal, family, and community level. This brief article will address the issue of successfully dealing with the ever present uncertainty about your personal safety, security and survival. The way

you deal with uncertainty has an impact on your overall health and well-being. The ability to cope successfully with uncertainty is necessary and essential to leading a productive and happy life. Failure to cope with uncertainty has unhealthy effects on your mind and body.

The key point to coping successfully with uncertainty is to stay calm, keep a cool head, and apply logical, rational, and effective ways to mastering the perils

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alienated from society. This can manifest in the form of cynicism, rejection of all moral and religious principles, and the feeling that life has no meaning, causing you to feel lost, dejected, and adrift, without purpose or direction. When you feel alienated like this, you become internally distracted and unable to stay abreast and aware of what is really going on in the immediate world around you.

Uncertainty is a fact of life. I believe that all uncertainty is fruitful, as long as it is accompanied by the wish to understand. On the other hand, uncertainty becomes an unnecessary burden when the fact of its reality is accompanied by the wish to deny that it exists, avoid the unknown, and by maladaptive efforts to manufacture evidence for certainty.

Nowadays, there seems to be more reasons to be afraid than in previous decades. The world is a more uncertain place than ever. There has been a sharp increase in the frequency of terrorist acts around the world, including in the United States. People are living with the threat of further terrorism, and the television and news media provide a continual stream of information that heightens the focus on these threats. Understandably, all of this has led many people to feel frightened of what the future may bring.

During this first decade of the 21st Century, many people, with good reason, have become less trusting in general, given increased media exposure of new kinds of scams, and a wide range of ways in which innocent people have been criminally victimized. Threats of violence, local, domestic and

international, wars around the world, unstable and oppressive governments, and the use of terror also have contributed to instability. This has been reflected in a major change in the stability of the world economy. In addition, technology is changing at a pace that can be described conservatively as "warp speed." All of this change, instability, and uncertainty have made people feel more vulnerable.

Vulnerability stems from the feeling that one has no control over the outcomes of what happens in the world. Feeling vulnerable leads people to feel more endangered and threatened. It can shatter our basic sense of trust and security in the world, our belief that the world is a safe place to live in, and our expectations that we will be here tomorrow. Our vulnerability can become a breeding ground for fears of all types, and erode our feelings of comfort and security in carrying on our day-to-day activities. The lack of adequate support and connectedness to other people can also become a breeding ground for alienation.

Given all the instability and uncertainty in our world today, my purpose in writing this brief article is to empower you by giving you five simple and practical solutions for coping with daily uncertainty. These solutions can help you to counter your feelings of vulnerability, fear, and alienation, and aid you in mastering your fears of the future. For a more detailed exposition of these concepts, see our book, *Coping With Uncertainty: 10 Simple Solutions* (B.N. Eimer and M.S. Torem, 2002).

1. Accept uncertainty as part of life:

Let's face it. When you leave the house in the morning, we don't know for sure what is going to happen to us. We can get hit by a Mack truck, attacked by terrorists, accosted by criminals, come home to a burglarized house, and so on. So, it is necessary for us to accept uncertainty as a fact of life. We must follow the Boy Scout motto and be prepared for the worst and expect the best.

2. Learn to think tactically:

Prepare yourself mentally for tactical situations. Use mental rehearsal to go over different scenarios in your mind and rehearse mastery of them. Learning to think tactically means learning to think about how you can apply various self-

defense and personal security techniques to accomplish survival tasks. These can be as simple and as common place as entering and exiting your vehicle.

3. Stay present and aware:

This means avoiding distractions. Awareness refers to self-awareness as well as other and environmental awareness. You want to nurture a developing, ever present awareness of how you appear and employ your personality in different situations. And you want to develop a continual 360 degree awareness and attention to the world around you. You do not want to let people sneak up on you.

4. Manage your negative moods:

Our moods include negative feeling states as well as positive feeling states. Managing negative moods is imperative for maintaining your personal safety. When you are depressed, or angry, or afraid, you are often focused inward and not paying attention to the world around you. You then become a prime target for victimization. Additionally, if you suffer from chronic feelings of fear, which can often turn into depression and anger turned inward, this is not conducive to carrying concealed. Your focus instead is on how you feel rather than what you can do. It has been said that chronic feelers are losers. The solution is to act healthfully no matter how you feel. Don't dawdle. Make decisions even if they are small ones. Take action. Don't languish in regret. Focus on what you have to accomplish.

5. Improve your tolerance for frustration:

Improve your tolerance for frustration so you can weather any storm. Frustration means not getting what you want or getting what you don't want. It refers to an obstruction that prevents you from reaching your goals. It refers to being hindered or restrained. Unfortunately, frustration is a fact of life. Ever since we humans were thrown out of the Garden of Eden, instant gratification has been a rare event. So, to live a healthy life, you must improve the coping skills that enable you to deal with frustration.

Frustration tolerance refers to the ability to continue living a balanced, healthy, life despite encountering repeated interferences. It refers to how robust you are in the face of life's stressors and challenges. How well you handle

frustration forms the basis for how well you cope with uncertainty. When you build strong frustration tolerance skills, you empower yourself to cope more effectively in times of uncertainty.

Chronically facing uncertainty with no resolute strategy or tactics for handling it can lead to a state of chronic stress. This is because we have a basic biological need to resolve uncertainty. This need to resolve uncertainty is what motivates new learning experiences. In fact, there is an optimal level of uncertainty. Too much uncertainty may provoke excessive anxiety and tension; too little uncertainty may lead to boredom and indifference.

So, one key to not becoming worn out by persistent uncertainty is to find ways to moderate the degree of uncertainty that you deal with in your day-to-day living. A second key is to control your anxiety about uncertainty. This entails learning how to accept and tolerate uncomfortable feelings. Unbound continuing uncertainty extracts a toll on your body. It triggers the "stress response," also called the "fight-flight response." This set of physical and mental reactions to uncertainty, to excessive demands, and to perceived or real threats is actually an adaptive response. It motivates you to reorient yourself in a reflex-like way, so that you can better cope with the stress of uncertainty.

This set of basic responses was necessary for survival in prehistoric times when humans lived in the wild with regular exposure to danger and life-threatening uncertainties. In fact, this fight-flight response continues to be basic to survival. However, when it is excessively or unnecessarily activated, your mind and body wear down. When the fight-flight stress response continues activating various cascades of hormonal and biochemical changes in your body, even after the reasons for your stress are gone, then you don't get any rest. Eventually you and your body become exhausted from the continual strain. Your body is like a brilliantly designed machine. Without proper tune-ups at appropriate intervals, you are likely to wear it out.

Your brain and body work in harmony together because there is a feedback system of chemical messenger molecules and hormones called neurotransmitters. Chronic stress triggers this hormonal-neurotransmitter system to work on overdrive, and eventually it gets worn down and you get worn down with it. A

variety of mental and physical disorders may result.

The neurotransmitter system is a communication system. It exists so that your cells can communicate with each other. It transmits electrical and chemical messages up and down your nervous system, to and from your brain, with the rest of your body. It needs to be well cared for and not to be on "red alert" all the time for your body and mind to function properly. Paranoia is not good.

Chronic states of stress throw this system out of balance. When we are over-aroused and anxious most of the time, this may result in certain conditions associated with running continually on overdrive. This may eventually lead to a system slowdown, producing other conditions, such as burnout or paranoia which then may lead to clinical depression. Moreover, being habitually stressed-out often leads to painful, distressing symptoms such as, insomnia, general fatigue, loss of energy, loss of enthusiasm, impaired concentration, being easily distracted, indecisiveness, lapses in judgment, slowed thinking, feeling drained, nervous, and irritable.

Summary:

Learn to manage uncertainty and stay safe and secure. Remember to pack

your personal defense tools on and around your person every day, and don't forget to be as prepared as you can be for every conceivable emergency.

References:

Eimer, B.N., & Torem, M.S. (2002). *Coping With Uncertainty: 10 Simple Solutions*. Oakland, Ca: New Harbinger Publications.

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