

Exercise

Professional Version | US English

Embracing Uncertainty



Description

Intolerance of uncertainty can be viewed as a dispositional characteristic that results from a set of negative beliefs about uncertainty and its implications.

Dugas & Robichaud (2007)

Intolerance of uncertainty involves the tendency to react negatively on an emotional, cognitive, and behavioral level to uncertain situations and events.

Dugas, Buhr, & Ladouceur (2004)

Intolerance of uncertainty was first described in individuals suffering from generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). Metaphors used to describe people who are intolerant of uncertainty talk about how they can behave almost as if they were 'allergic to uncertainty', or as though they have a 'phobia of uncertainty'. Many behaviors associated with GAD, such as worry and avoidance, can be framed as attempts to increase one's sense of certainty. Understood in this way, worry is the attempt to look ahead and foresee potentially negative consequences, and avoidance and 'sticking to what is known and safe' reduces exposure to the unknown.

Unfortunately, attempts to feel better by increasing one's sense of certainty often result in unintended consequences. For example, attempting to 'think ahead' in order to foresee difficulties can result in worry that feels uncontrollable and actually generates more uncertain possibilities and anxiety. Attempting to stick to what is known and safe can result in feeling less confident when you inevitably encounter novelty and change. In the context of OCD, compulsive checking as a strategy to increase one's sense of certainty actually leads to an increase in doubt (Radomsky et al, 2014).

Wilkinson, Meares & Freeston (2011) describe various strategies for overcoming intolerance of uncertainty. One **cognitive approach** is to understand an individual's beliefs and rules about uncertainty (e.g. "If I go into an uncertain situation without preparing then I won't be able to cope") and then test these with behavioral experiments. A more **behavioral approach** for addressing intolerance of uncertainty is to encourage clients to introduce uncertain events into their lives gradually. Through a process of exposure and habituation clients, can be helped to behave in more flexible ways.

This *Embracing Uncertainty* exercise describes the continuum of intolerance of uncertainty, the rationale for exposing oneself to uncertain situations, and suggests 'embracing uncertainty' tasks that clients can be encouraged to try.

Instructions

Consider introducing this exercise in the following terms:

“When people find uncertain situations anxiety-provoking, we sometimes say that they are ‘intolerant of uncertainty’. It’s almost as though they have an allergic reaction to situations where they don’t know what the outcome will be. In this way it is a bit like a phobia. Some people who are intolerant of uncertainty might avoid trying new activities, or might avoid situations that they can’t control or predict. Others try to reduce uncertainty wherever they can. For example, they might find out as much as they can before going somewhere new, order the same meal at a restaurant, or sit in the same place on a train. Does any of that sound familiar to you?

One good way that psychologists have found to help people to overcome fears like these is to use ‘graded exposure’. To help someone with a phobia overcome their fear of dogs they would be gradually introduced to dogs – perhaps to pictures, then to a puppy, and then to bigger dogs. We can do a similar thing when people are intolerant of uncertainty. By gradually introducing elements of uncertainty into your life we can help you to live more of the life that you want to lead. Would you be willing to explore how we might do this together?”

References

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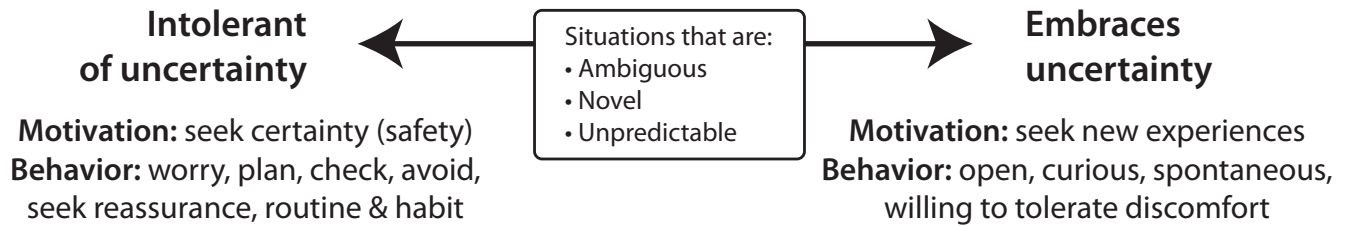
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Wilkinson, A., Meares, K., Freeston, M. 2011. CBT for worry & generalised anxiety disorder. London: Sage.

Embracing Uncertainty

Life is uncertain: we can never be 100% sure what is going to happen. Some people are OK with this and find it easy to embrace new experiences. Other people struggle with uncertainty: it is almost as if they have a phobia of it, and they often do things like *worry* or *plan* in attempts to reduce uncertainty.



Embracing uncertainty can allow you to enjoy more of life, and to respond more flexibly to challenges that come your way. One way of doing this is to gradually introduce uncertain events into your life. Try to embrace uncertainty by experimenting with some of the tasks below:

<p>Walk a different route.</p> 	<p>Order something new from the menu in a restaurant.</p> 	<p>Try a new class.</p> 	<p>Go somewhere you have never been.</p> 
<p>See a film at the cinema without reading reviews.</p> 	<p>Have a different lunch every day.</p> 	<p>Read a different newspaper, or something by a new author.</p> 	<p>Talk to someone you don't know (ask a question, pay them a compliment).</p> 
<p>Wear something 'new' for you (e.g. style, brand).</p> 	<p>Do an activity that you have avoided so far.</p> 	<p>Talk about things that are more 'risky' for you (e.g. politics, yourself, opinions).</p> 	<p>Listen to music that you wouldn't normally listen to.</p> 
<p>Sit in a different place than you normally do.</p> 	<p>Delegate tasks to others.</p> 	<p>Sleep on a different side of the bed.</p> 	<p>Try a different brand of toothpaste.</p> 

Tips for embracing uncertainty:

- Adopt the mindset that it is good for you to take small risks and challenge yourself.
- Make 'trying new things' a regular part of your life.
- You're trying to build a 'tolerance of uncertainty muscle' so you will need to practice regularly.
- Maintain a curious and open approach by focusing on the outcome of your experiments, not on the emotional experience: What did you learn? What did you experience that was new and exciting? What did that experiment do for your confidence?

*The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, is nothing, and becomes nothing.
He may avoid suffering and sorrow, but he simply cannot learn, feel, change, grow or love.
Chained by his certitude, he is a slave; he has forfeited his freedom.
Only the person who risks is truly free.*

– Leo Buscaglia (1982)

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