

Coping with the Stress of Uncertainty

Objective

To better manage and accept uncertainty while reducing the associated stress.

What to Know

There have been several recent disruptive changes in the world. Perhaps your work life, social life, and mental and physical health have been negatively impacted by events and circumstances beyond your control.

Have you experienced any of these symptoms? Check off any that apply to you:

- anxiety, worry, or panic
- fear
- frustration or irritability
- depression or sadness
- anger
- helplessness
- uncertainty
- skepticism
- confusion
- high stress
- overly concerned about your health and the health of people around you
- grief or loss
- difficulty concentrating or lack of focus
- overwhelm
- sleep problems
- appetite changes
- hyper-focus on the news and/or social media
- social withdrawal or feeling disconnected from others
- powerlessness

These are all valid responses to global events that are uncertain, unpredictable, or unclear. Outcomes are often unknown, and these experiences impact how you behave, your relationships and social connections, work productivity, and even how you view the world.

The APA's [Stress in America Survey](#) identified how uncertainty contributes to stress. 63% of participants agreed that uncertainty about the near future causes them stress, and 49% indicated that current events have made planning for the future feel impossible.

You cannot always avoid or control unexpected events, or make the current uncertainty go away, but there are steps you can take to help you better manage and accept life's uncertainties and cope with the distress you are experiencing. Here are some suggestions:

1. Avoid making assumptions about the future. The news and social media can trigger worry about the future, and it might feel like your fears will come true. When you notice you are in fear about something, breathe in and out slowly and return to the present moment.

2. Question catastrophic thinking. Sometimes problems can seem like they catastrophes. Notice when your mind begins to focus on bad things happening. Grab a journal or notebook and answer the following questions:

- How bad is this problem likely to be?
- Will it be the worst thing that's ever happened to me?
- Is it something I'll never recover from?
- Is it a situation I'll live through and manage?
- Is this likely to be as terrible as I fear?
- What can I control about this situation?

3. Imagine yourself coping. Bad things do happen—but imagine yourself handling them. In the past, you found ways to successfully handle challenges. When you worry something might happen, imagine yourself coping and recall the strength you have shown in the past. Expect that you will be resourceful.

4. Focus on what is real. When you are fearful, recognize it might be a fantasy that may (or may not) come true. Touch a physical object nearby and say, "This is real."

5. Turn off the news. Constantly checking the news can destroy your peace of mind. It may be unrealistic to completely avoid the news, but you can limit your exposure to once a day.

6. Release tension. Stress about current events can lead to physical tension in the body—shoulder, neck, or back muscle knots, stomach tightness, or general aches and pains. Pause when you notice you are holding tension in your body and do this brief exercise:

- Inhale for a count of four and exhale for a count of five.
- Breathe in and shrug your shoulders up toward your ears.
- Exhale slowly as you completely let go of tension.
- Allow your shoulders to relax and drop.
- Repeat twice more, each time with a calming breath in and out.
- End with three more breaths.

- 7. Accept uncertainty.** Facing so many unknowns and trying to predict what will happen can lead to worry and a false sense of responsibility. You do not have to figure everything out. Instead, accept the uncertainty.
- 8. Connect.** Remain in contact with loved ones and find ways to meet their needs in loving ways.
- 9. Find peace.** Life is about more than avoiding bad things and making sure you never experience loss. Find peace by knowing that nothing about life is guaranteed—and everything will be OK.
- 10. Be honest with yourself.** Notice and acknowledge distressing thoughts, and ask yourself, “What am I afraid of or worried about *right now*?” Write it down.
- 11. Challenge distressing thoughts that may be irrational.** Perhaps you respond to anxious thoughts by seeking out evidence that supports them and ignoring evidence that disputes them. Consider alternative perspectives and weigh *all* available evidence.
- 12. Cultivate optimism.** Try to reframe your thoughts and focus on the positive.
- 13. Focus on what you can control.** Consider aspects of your life you can control. Ask yourself, “What’s within my power?” If you have done what you can, or the answer is “nothing,” focus on something you can control. For example, you can plan meals for the week or establish routines to give your days structure.
- 14. Practice mindfulness.** When you feel distressed, notice your breathing. Intentionally extend your exhales—for example, breathing in for a count of four and breathing out for a count of six.
- 15. Ground yourself.** Notice what you are experiencing through all five senses.
- 16. Start a gratitude journal.** Gratitude increases wellbeing, so each morning, write down three things for which you are grateful. Or send a brief note of appreciation to someone.
- 17. Get plenty of physical activity.** A brisk walk or a 10-minute stretch can make you feel energized and productive. Schedule movement throughout the day.
- 18. Be kind to yourself.** Avoid beating yourself up if your tolerance for unpredictability or uncertainty is lower than someone else’s.
- 19. Develop new skills.** Try things outside your comfort zone and take risks to increase your confidence and build skills that can help you when life becomes challenging.
- 20. Take your own advice.** Ask yourself, “If a friend came to me with this concern, what would I say?” Write it down. Doing this can give you a different perspective and new ideas.
- 21. Prioritize self-care.** Each day try to eat well and get enough sleep. Find activities for stress release, such as yoga or meditation.
- 22. Seek support.** You might be tempted to isolate yourself when you are stressed or worried. Social support (and perhaps even professional support) can help you cope, so reach out.

Do you have any other ideas to manage the stress associated with uncertainty? If yes, write them down.

Using the above suggestions, this worksheet will help you better manage and accept uncertainty while reducing your stress.

What to Do

Over the next two weeks use the following chart to record at least one thing you can do each day to manage and accept uncertainty while reducing the associated stress. Refer to the list of activities above. Record the date, the action or technique you used, what happened, and how you felt afterward. Finally, note whether you believe this helped reduce your stress.

Date	Action or technique	What happened?	How did you feel after?	Stress reduced? Y / N

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Did this exercise help you reduce your stress? Why or why not?

Do you feel better equipped to manage uncertainty? Why or why not?

What else can you do to manage and accept uncertainty? Explain.

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?
