Embracing Uncertainty

Peter W. Barnes, Ph.D.
University Counseling Center
Objectives

• Identify and normalize the various reactions to the current stressful circumstances.
• Understand the reciprocal relationship between the desire for certainty and higher anxiety.
• Illustrate how to be more embracing of uncertainty.
• Identify other practical strategies for coping.
Crisis, Stress, and the Struggle for Control and Certainty
The Crisis: A Disruptive Existential Threat

- Financial
- Employment and job prospects
- Health and safety of self and loved ones
- Grief and loss
- Isolation and loneliness
- Hostility and discrimination from others
- Stress
Reactions to Stress

- Racing thoughts
- Increased heart rate,
- Sweating
- Shaking
- Shortness of breath
- Body discomfort
- Restlessness
- Nausea
- Hypervigilance,
- Irritability,
- Inability to focus
- Fatigue
- Fear
- Problems sleeping
Reactions to Stress

When they are stressed, many people ...

- cannot focus
- get angry easily
- cannot sit still
- have difficulty sleeping
- feel sad or guilty
- worry
- cry
- feel very tired
- have changes in appetite.

Other people find their body gets sick – skin rashes, infections, illnesses or bowel problems.
Certainty and Control

- Human beings crave security and certainty.
- Provides a sense of control.

But....

- How much do we really have control over?
- Lots of uncertainty that we already accept.
- As a species, we’ve been here before.
- What would life be like if everything was certain?
Future-Oriented Thinking

- Your brain’s #1 job = don’t get killed.
- Errs on the side of perceiving threats.
- This means protecting oneself and similar others.
- Chill cavemen/cavewomen didn’t survive.
- Planning, preparing for foreseeable threats and problems gives us a survival advantage.
- All of these physiological and emotional reactions serve a purpose: survival.
Is life supposed to be so expected?

- We differ in openness to change.
- What might be the downside of expecting a yellow brick road?
- What risks do we take and uncertainties do we normally accept without even thinking about it?
- The unexpected is expected.
The Upside of a Crisis

- Potential to facilitate social cooperation and cohesiveness toward a higher purpose
- New opportunities
- Innovation
- Gain perspective: what really matters?
- Opportunity to reaffirm values
Existential Awareness

• Death or the threat of death reminds us that our lives are finite.
• This naturally challenges us to reevaluate what we are doing with the time we have, offering us an opportunity to reflect on what really matters and whether our behavior aligns with it. meaning, purpose, values.
• Spirituality and Connection
Reaffirming Values

• What do you want to stand for in the face of this crisis?
• What sort of person do you want to be, as you go through this?
• How do you want to treat yourself and others?
• Your values might include
  – love, respect, humour, patience, courage, honesty, caring, openness, kindness …. or numerous others.
• Look for ways to ‘sprinkle’ these values into your day. Let them guide and motivate your committed action.
Worry: What is it Good For?
Worry--what is it good for?

Anything can be a trigger for worry. Even when things go right, you might manage to think to yourself "but what if it all falls apart?"

Worry can be triggered by lots of things. (e.g., news)
Catastrophizing

- Imagining worst case scenarios and living it in your mind as if it is happening right now.
  - Overestimating how bad it will be.
  - Underestimating your ability to cope.
- Meanwhile, in reality you might just be sitting in a chair.
Dysfunctional Beliefs about Worry and Anxiety

- Stress is harmful/bad for you.
- I need to worry to prove that I care.
- Worry prevents misfortune.
- Worry emotionally prepares me for misfortune if it were to happen.
- If I have a fearful thought, there must be a legitimate reason.
- If I feel anxious, there must be danger (emotional reasoning)
Unhelpful Coping

- Excessively seek reassurance from others
- Micromanage people
- Procrastinate
- Repeatedly check things

*These alleviate anxiety in the short term but create more anxiety in the long-term.
So What Can You Do?
Focus on What is in your Control

• Need for control and certainty = MORE ANXIETY

• Instead, make a commitment to work on:
  – Differentiating what is and what is NOT within your control.
  – Letting go of what is not within your control
  – Becoming more accepting of uncertainty
What is and is NOT in my Control?

I CANNOT CONTROL
(So, I can LET GO of these things.)

IF OTHERS FOLLOW THE RULES OF SOCIAL DISTANCING
THE AMOUNT OF TOILET PAPER AT THE STORE

I CAN CONTROL
(So, I will focus on these things.)

IF OTHERS FOLLOW THE RULES OF SOCIAL DISTANCING
THE AMOUNT OF TOILET PAPER AT THE STORE

MY POSITIVE ATTITUDE
TURNING OFF THE NEWS
FINDING FUN THINGS TO DO AT HOME

HOW LONG THIS WILL LAST

MY OWN SOCIAL DISTANCING
LIMITING MY SOCIAL MEDIA

HOW OTHERS REACT

MY KINDNESS & GRACE

OTHER PEOPLE’S MOTIVES

PREDICTING WHAT WILL HAPPEN

THE ACTIONS OF OTHERS

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Real vs. Hypothetical Worries

- **Real problem worries** are about actual problems that need solutions right now. For example, given the very real concern about the virus at the moment, there are helpful solutions which include regular handwashing, social distancing, and physical isolation if you have symptoms.

- **Hypothetical worries** about the current health crisis might include thinking about worst-case scenarios (what we might call catastrophizing). For example, imagining worst case scenarios such as *most* people dying.
Real vs. Hypothetical Worries

Real problem worries are about *actual* problems that are affecting you *right now.*

- “My children are off school and I need help looking after them.”
- “I don’t have enough food in the house to last more than a few days.”

Hypothetical worries are about things that do not currently exist, but which *might* happen in the future.

- “What will I do if I lose my job and end up destitute?”
- “I’m young and healthy but what if I end up on a ventilator?”
Real vs. Hypothetical Worries

**Normal worry**
- Helps you to get what you want
- Helps you to solve problems in your life

**Excessive worry**
- Leaves you feeling demoralized, upset, or exhausted
- Gets in the way of living the life you want to lead
Practice postponing your worry. Worry is insistent – it can make you feel as though you have to engage with it right now.

Set aside time each day to let yourself worry (e.g. 30 minutes at the end of each day).

It can feel like an odd thing to do at first!

It also means that for the other 23.5 hours in the day you try to let go of the worry until you get to your 'worry time'.
Living in the Present
What mindfulness it is NOT:

- clearing your mind
- keeping your focus
- relaxing
Mindfulness: Be in the Present

What it is...

• Adopting a gentle, open, curious, allowing stance towards your experience as it unfolds from moment to moment.
• When your mind wanders...simply bring it back. Again & again & again & again...
Grounding or Dropping Anchor

To get a sense of where you are and refocus your attention on the activity you are doing.

• Look around the room and notice 5 things you can see.
• Notice 3 or 4 things you can hear.
• Notice what you can smell or taste or sense in your nose and mouth
• Notice what you are doing
• End the exercise by giving your full attention to the task or activity at hand.
Trying to CONTROL Thoughts & Feelings

- Does it work?
- Think of something you’ve been worried about.
- Now try NOT to think of it.
- Now try NOT to have any of the feelings that showed up.
Making Room for Thoughts & Feelings

• Allow yourself to feel the uncertainty.
• Allow the feelings that came along with it.
• Allow the thoughts, recognizing that they are just thoughts--not facts.
• Come back to the present moment, again and again, re-engaging in what you were doing especially what matters.
• Give up needing to NOT have difficult thoughts or feelings.
• If they persist, bring them along with you.
Defusion

- Relating to your thoughts as “just thoughts.”
- Not as concerned as to whether the thought is true. Rather, is it useful?
- Avoiding the trap of trying to control them.
  - if NOT useful: NEITHER push them away, NOR engage them.
- Allowing thoughts to come and go as they please as part of your experience instead of the focus of your experience.
- Patiently and repeatedly coming back to the present moment once you are hooked.
Acceptance/Willingness

- Seeing feelings as sensory info; neither bad nor good--just labeled as such.
- Never meant to be the controlled; like the weather.
- Allowing feelings to be as they are without judging them or trying to control them.
- Opening up to them, making space for them...softening around them...breathing into them.
Self-Compassion

• ‘If someone I loved was going through this experience, feeling what I am feeling – if I wanted to be kind and caring towards them, how would I treat them?
• How would I behave towards them?
• What might I say or do?’
• Then try treating yourself the same way.
Committed Action

**Animals**
- Pet an animal
- Walk a dog
- Listen to the birds

**Create**
- Draw a picture
- Paint a portrait
- Take a photograph
- Doodle / sketch
- Organise photographs
- Make a photograph album
- Start a scrapbook
- Finish a project
- Do some sewing / knitting

**Mind**
- Daydream
- Meditate
- Pray
- Reflect
- Think
- Try relaxation exercises
- Practise yoga

**Schedule**
- Get up extra early
- Stay up late
- Sleep in late
- Tick something off your ‘to do’ list

**Be active**
- Go for a walk
- Go for a run
- Go for a swim
- Go cycling
- Use an exercise video at home

**Expression**
- Laugh
- Cry
- Sing
- Shout
- Scream

**Music**
- Listen to music you like
- Find some new music to listen to
- Turn on the radio
- Make some music
- Sing a song
- Play an instrument
- Listen to a podcast

**Self care**
- Take a bath
- Take a shower
- Wash your hair
- Give yourself a facial
- Trim your nails
- Sunbathe (wear sunscreen!)
- Take a nap

**Clean**
- Clean the house
- Clean the yard
Committed Action

Kindness
- Help a friend / neighbor / stranger
- Make a gift for someone
- Try a random act of kindness
- Do someone a favour
- Teach somebody a skill
- Do something nice for someone
- Plan a surprise for someone
- Make a list of your good points
- Make a list of things or people you are grateful for

Nature
- Try some gardening
- Plant something
- Do some pruning
- Mow the lawn
- Pick flowers
- Buy flowers
- Go for a walk in nature
- Sit in the sun

Try something new
- Try a new food
- Listen to some new music
- Watch a new TV show or movie
- Wear some new clothes
- Read a new book
- Do something spontaneous
- Express yourself

Connect with people
- Contact a friend
- Join a new group
- Join a political party
- Join a dating website
- Send a message to a friend
- Write a letter to a friend
- Reconnect with an old friend

Learn
- Learn something new
- Learn a new skill
- Learn a new fact
- Watch a tutorial video

Plan
- Set a goal
- Create a budget
- Make a 5 year plan
- Make a ‘to do’ list
- Make a ‘bucket list’
- Make a shopping list

Watch
- Watch a movie
- Watch a TV show
- Watch a YouTube video

Cook
- Cook a meal for yourself
- Cook a meal for someone else
- Bake a cake / cookies
- Roast marshmallows
- Find a new recipe
Balance and Self-Care

- Stay Mentally and Physically Active
- Relaxation/Leisure
- Sleep
- Diet Nutrition
- Routine
- Notice and Limit Worry Triggers
- Practice Kindness and Gratitude
References and Resources


