

UNCERTAINTY IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION: UNCERTAINTY

- COVID-19 is an unprecedented public health crisis, impacting every person and aspect of public life.
- This crisis is new and difficult to predict. We don't have a "map", and many questions can be answered with "We're not sure. We don't yet know."
- COVID-19 has forced us to acknowledge and experience **uncertainty** to a rare degree.
- This matters because uncertainty *feels* incredibly uncomfortable for people
 - Knowing what to expect and having a plan feels comfortable. We feel in control.
 - Uncertainty leads to anxiety focused on the future: we worry, imagine all possible outcomes or worst-case scenarios, try to "prepare", think "what if?"
This is exhausting & overwhelming.
 - Attempting to "solve" or reduce uncertainty adds to suffering and stress, and can take away from our ability to respond effectively in the moment.



OUR TOLERANCE FOR UNCERTAINTY VARIES



- Life is always uncertain, but we are not usually reminded of this all at once
- People go to great lengths to try to reduce feelings of uncertainty
 - Typically we cope with uncertainty by ignoring it, taking one step at a time
 - When confronted with uncertainty, we often try to reduce it: when waiting for a test result, we may research symptoms, or get reassurance from others
- During COVID-19, attempts to cope with uncertainty can include:
 - Watching or reading news constantly
 - Ruminating or worrying alone or out loud with others
 - Attempting to “prepare” (panic-buying items, trying to mentally prepare for all situations)
 - Thinking about worst-case situations that may happen
 - Avoiding the feeling/trying to “just pass the time”
- These behaviors are attempting to reduce uncertainty; they are also increasing distress and fatigue

UNCERTAINTY IN HEALTHCARE WORKERS

- Healthcare workers provide valuable services to their communities
 - One role is helping patients and families to understand what is happening to them, and helping them to know what to expect.
- Healthcare professionals are used to *reducing uncertainty for others*
 - They may feel responsible for having a plan, having the answers
 - They may feel stress from not being able to help in this way
 - They may feel responsible for what happens, even though they do not control it
- Healthcare workers are used to minimizing their own uncertainty
 - Typically, hard work and preparation can reduce uncertainty in their roles
 - Today, we as a society are struggling to meet the demands of the pandemic
- Healthcare workers are experiencing moral injury/distress
 - Lack of global preparedness, infrastructure, and PPE can weigh heavily



WHAT CAN WE DO?

NAME AND VALIDATE UNCERTAINTY. IT IS 100% NORMAL.

- Name uncertainty
 - When you notice “what ifs”, name them as what they are. “Here’s uncertainty”
 - Notice whether something is “know-able” in the present moment. If it is not able to be known, disengage and return to the present moment
 - Notice the level of responsibility you are feeling. Does it match your role/ability?
- Validate and normalize uncertainty and anxiety (for ourselves, and for others)
 - It makes sense to feel overwhelmed by something overwhelming. It is normal not to feel OK when things are not OK
 - Anxiety is a normal, healthy, and temporary body state. It means we are trying to keep ourselves and others safe
 - Healthy bodies ‘activate’ when anxious; Breathe through anxiety ‘spikes’ until heart rate returns to normal



COPE WITH UNCERTAINTY TOGETHER

- Remind yourself and others that we are capable of living with uncertainty. We have done this all our lives, and are now learning together to manage uncertainty on a larger scale
- Practice tolerating (instead of fighting) and accepting uncertainty together
 - Express to ourselves and others: “You Are Not Alone”
 - We can share this experience together and can cope together
- Remind each other to return to the present moment
- Remind each other what we can and can’t control, what we are and are not responsible for
 - We CAN control our actions (taking precautions, following guidelines, doing our best)
 - We CAN’T control, and are not responsible for, outcomes (if someone gets sick or gets well)



ENGAGE IN SELF-COMPASSION

- Uncertainty exists in our mind; anxiety exists in our body. We can not remove them, but we can have compassion when they arise.
 - We can notice uncertainty
 - We can notice common humanity – that we are not alone
 - We can be kind to ourselves
- Practice exercises:
 - <https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/>
 - <https://centerformsc.org/10-self-compassion-practices-for-covid-19/>



ENGAGE IN VALUED ACTION

- Valued action gives us something meaningful to DO in the present moment. It gives us opportunities to be proud and do what matters to us.
 - Line up your actions with a value (kindness, connection) that is important to you
 - We can not predict or choose what happens; we can choose how we “show up” to uncertainty
 - Kindness: Use a gentle tone of voice with a patient
 - Connection: Tell a coworker you appreciate them
- Even during this time, good things exist. Notice moments of appreciation and gratitude.

