



## DECREASE YOUR ANXIETY BY LEARNING TO TOLERATE UNCERTAINTY

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You may have heard the famous line by Benjamin Franklin, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." Well it is probably safe to say that we can also be certain of uncertainty. Unless you can predict the future, uncertainty is ever present in our lives. We continually face uncertainty everyday and take risks as soon as we step out of our homes.

We know from research that people differ in terms of how much uncertainty they can tolerate. Some people can tolerate a lot of uncertainty in their lives, whereas other people have extreme difficulty tolerating even a small amount of it. We also know that a frequent cause of anxiety is an inability to tolerate uncertainty. Thus, the cure is to learn to be more tolerant of uncertainty.



**A helpful example:** Intolerance of uncertainty is similar to an allergic reaction. If you are allergic to pollen or dust as an example, the smallest contact with these will set off an allergic reaction involving sneezing, watery eyes and discomfort. Intolerance of uncertainty is similar. Exposure to the smallest degree of uncertainty will trigger anxiety, increased heart rate, dizziness and difficulty breathing.

### WHAT BEHAVIOURS DOES INTOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY LEAD TO?

As mentioned previously, when intolerance of uncertainty is a problem, anxiety is the result. In order to decrease uncertainty and the associated anxiety, people engage in a number of behaviours in order to decrease the uncertainty.

**Avoidance:** Some people will avoid certain activities (e.g. driving) because of the uncertainties that are involved. This can also include avoiding certain people and places as well.

**Double Checking:** Checking things over and over again to make sure you have not made a mistake and that everything is perfect (e.g. rereading a text).

**Seeking Reassurance:** Asking friends or family the same question over and over or asking different people the same question to make sure you get the same answer. If this is a problem for you, you might find the toolkit on Stop Seeking Reassurance helpful.

**Making Long Lists:** Some people will make long lists to make sure they do not forget. At the extreme, this may involve making lists everyday and even for the most trivial of things.

**Worrying:** You may ask yourself “What if ...” after every uncertainty you face. If this is a problem for you, you might find the toolkit on Stop Worrying helpful.

**Refusing To Delegate:** Not giving anyone else a task to complete (i.e. at home, work, or to friends) because you are unsure whether it will be done to your liking.

**Distraction:** When intolerant of uncertainty, some people will engage in other activities in order not to face the uncertainty. For example, keep busy after work to not file taxes that are past due.

Although all the above behaviours are meant to help cope with uncertainty, they not only require time and energy, but can also lead to mental and physical exhaustion from the effort. Furthermore, you may have noticed that these behaviours do not in fact resolve the problem of uncertainty because it is impossible to get rid of all uncertainty in our lives! In fact, engaging in the above behaviours as a way to cope may simply fuel further uncertainty and anxiety. If these behaviours were in fact helpful, chances are you would no longer feel anxious whenever uncertainty presented itself! Thus, the only antidote to uncertainty is learning to become tolerant of it.

## LEARNING TO TOLERATE UNCERTAINTY

### 1. Learn To Accept That Uncertainty Is A Part Of Life

Instead of telling yourself that you have to be 100% certain all of the time, tell yourself that this is impossible since no one can predict the future. Write down how your life would be different if you could tolerate uncertainty.

### 2. Learn To Tolerate Uncertainty By Doing Exposure

- a. List all the situations you try to be certain off and any associated safety behaviours you engage in to help you be 100% certain. Make sure to look at the list above to help you out. Create an exposure hierarchy by ranking all these situations and behaviours. Make sure to read the toolkit on Exposure Therapy to help you out!
- b. Learn to tolerate uncertainty by starting with a situation or safety behaviour that would be easy to change and practice being uncertain. For example, if you reread emails three or more times to check for errors, then only double check once, which is what most people do. If you order the same meal at a restaurant, then pick a new meal you

have not tried in the past. If you seek reassurance from numerous people, only ask one person.

- c. Make sure to write down your predictions of what will happen before you perform the exposure exercise. What is the worst thing that can happen? What is the chance that something bad will happen? What will happen to your anxiety? Will it increase to an intolerable level? Make sure to re-evaluate these beliefs after the exposure exercise. Did they come true? Did anything bad happen? Did your anxiety spiral out of control?

### **3. Take Control Of Your Negative Thinking**

Chances are that negative thinking is contributing to your intolerance of uncertainty. Common negative thoughts might include:

- I can't do it!
- What if I make a mistake? What if the other person makes a mistake?
- What will other people think?
- This is too difficult!
- I won't be able to handle it!
- I'm not sure.
- I don't remember checking!

When performing exposure, make sure that you talk back to any negative thinking with balanced and realistic thinking. Make sure to use the Change Your Negative Thinking toolkit to help you out.