

LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

Living with uncertainty - and there is a great deal of it around at the moment - is hard. It hurts. Trying to predict what the future holds is as important to us as any of our primary needs, food shelter, sex. And for that reason, it's what our brain spends most of its time doing.

Our brain was not designed (primarily) to think; it was designed to survive. And survival depends on making predictions about the future so that we can be prepared. Making predictions is our brain's top priority.

So when we look into an uncertain future where we can't easily predict what's going to happen, we're not happy. We fight against uncertainty and ambiguity; we insist that somebody tells us exactly and precisely what's going to happen next. We want a solid road map, and it better be up to Michelin standard.

But truth be told, uncertainty is all we have. We don't know what will happen even an hour from now. We think we have everything under control; the table is laid, the dinner is coming along nicely. But that's what's happening right now. Who knows where we'll be in an hour. Everyone may or may not make it to the table; The food may be perfect or not quite perfect; we may have a delightful conversation or someone may have some bad news to share. When we have good memories of Sunday dinners, and our preparations are on track, our predictions about this dinner are very likely positive. We're happy that everything is going to work out, and it generally does.

But as we move our attention further into the future, particularly when we see ominous clouds gathering on the horizon, we realise there is less and less that we can be sure about. We would settle for knowing for sure that something bad is definitely going to happen, rather than be told that something bad may or may not happen. Research participants who were told that they had a 50% chance of receiving a painful electric shock felt far more anxious and agitated than participants who believed they were definitely going to receive a shock.

So how do people deal with uncertainty? There are whole industries devoted to filling in the blanks about the future from astrology apps to investment advisors. Fundamentalist churches simplify things by providing us with unambiguous rules and cast iron predictions. Conspiracy theorists reduce complexity and the unknown to very simple explanations.

For most of us, we construct predictions - best guesses - based on past experience, our physical state in the moment, and cues from those around us. The more unclear the future looks, the more we tend to generate changing, unstable and often negative predictions about the future. Our brain considers all the bad things that might happen to prevent us from being blind-sided. When someone who feels very anxious thinks out loud about their future, they can sound irrational. Because when we're fighting life with one hand tied behind our back, being reasonable is not our first port of call. Survival trumps reason. Better to be safe than sorry.

As Mark Twain once said:

"I'm an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."

People who are vulnerable to feeling anxious experience very unstable changing predictions about the future. They've usually been blindsided by life in the past. Their minds are a library of things that might go horribly wrong. They worry so that they can get the jump on them before they land.

The more I've listened to people who worry about the future, the more it has struck me that what they worry about has already happened. They are not so much concerned with something bad happening in the future, as they are about reliving some bad experience in the past and from which they've never recovered. Their agitated concerns about the future may sound unreasonable, but they know bad things can and do happen. And they fear having to relive them. To protect themselves, they remain hypervigilant, post sentries on every rampart, as threats to their psyche may come, at any time, from North, South, East or West.

In sharp contrast to this, someone who is very depressed deals with the pain of uncertainty by nailing their colours to a very small number of rigid negative predictions about their future:

"I'm a terrible person; I've always been a terrible person and I always will. People don't like me no matter what they say. When people who like me get to know me, they will give up on me. I'm a loser, I always have been and I always will be. That's my life".

We know these predictions are not the true. But for a depressed person, who has had one too many disappointments in their lives already, holding solid negative predictions - which we call despair - may feel easier to live with than having their hopes raised one moment, only to be shattered the next.

Our predictions - the brain's best guess about what could happen next - are not random. They are based on past experience, our present day physical health, how prepared we feel we are, and the discourse of the community around us.

Certain situations make our predictions more likely to be negative. When we are physically worn out, struggling with toxic stresses in our lives, when we've grown up in a harsh or chaotic environment; when our bodies are inflamed, our immune systems compromised, we find it much harder to predict positive outcomes and we underestimate the resources we can draw on to cope.

Recognising and accepting how uncertainty is hard for all of us is important. We can stop blaming ourselves and cut ourselves some slack. We can be a little kinder to ourselves and to each other. And we can hear what others have found to be helpful in terms of living with uncertainty.

HOW CAN WE TOLERATE UNCERTAINTY?

Here are three key ways that people have found to be helping in living with uncertainty.

1. **ACCEPT UNCERTAINTY:**

Uncertainty is the only certainty we have. It may be hard to take, but it's also what can give us hope. It's true bad things have happened in the past and that they will happen in the future. But it's equally true that life can surprise us and amaze us. When we can accept the essential unpredictability of our lives and stop resisting it, we do better. When we fight against it and lose ourselves in some story about unfair this is, we inflame our bodies and minds and reduce our ability to deal with whatever challenges and opportunities that are waiting for us.

When we oppose and resent uncertainty, we add a layer of distress to the situation. We amplify our fears, we escalate and prolong them. What we resist persists. When we can meet life as it is and work with it, we move forward. When we stop fighting against reality we accept what we feel. Which may not be a good feeling. Nobody is saying you have to like uncertainty. But when you can come to terms with it as both a cruel and an immensely creative fact of life, and when you can allow yourself to feel what you feel about the situation, whatever that is, chances are you will soon feel a lot calmer.

Acceptance is not resignation. When I accept uncertainty I'm saying that whatever is happening right now will change. My life may be upended by what happens but it may also change for the better. I will face whatever happens and deal with it, rather than resent it and feel helpless.

But even when the future does hurt, we forget something very important. When we are anticipate something bad happening to us, we are not the person we will be when it actually happens. We don't know how we will react when we are faced with a real situation that is clear and certain and right before our eyes. How that person deals with whatever has to be faced will be different way to whatever they may have been imagining when it was an unclear but threatening possibility.

Facing the reality of something difficult is always different to how we may have imagined it would be. Maybe not quite as hard or maybe harder. But the point is that we are different. We may surprise ourselves. We may discover resources in ourselves, in close relationships and in the kindness of perfect strangers that we never factored into our predictions

Nobody knows what will happen, and nobody knows how they will respond until they are in a real situation facing some actual challenge. Rather than ruminate over all that might go wrong, or trying to fill our heads with positive thoughts that everything will be great, what we need is to appreciate the resources we have right now as we deal with our lives today. Our best resource for tolerating uncertainty is our belief in ourselves and in the relationships we have right now and rely on.

2. **DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK:**

No matter how bright you are, your predictions about the future are thoughts and not truths. Even if they are close to the truth you don't know exactly how things will unfold.

And if you haven't figured out exactly what's going to happen, nobody else has either. Be careful what you listen to and take for the truth. All you have are guesses, and it's to remember that.

When our best guesses are worst case scenarios, our thoughts can generate a lot of fear and distress. We tend to react to our thoughts as though what we fear happening in the future has already happened.

Many of us have had a vaccine jab recently. How many of us stood or sat in the waiting years, We felt the hurt of the needle as we waited to be called for our injection. That was real pain, not imaginary pain. And then we got the actual injection and discovered it didn't hurt at all.

When we're feeling insecure we over-predict the likelihood of bad things happening, and experience the horrors of that even if it never happens.

Imagine if you went looking for advice about how best to invest your savings and the person advising you was agitated and pointed out nervously to you all the ways that things could go horribly wrong and that you could lose your money. You probably wouldn't continue to work with him or her. We would want a vision of the future that included not only what could go wrong, but what could go right.

Negative unstable predictions wear us down rather than help us to prepare for future setbacks, and they can leave us feeling paralysed with fear. We feel threatened, and beaten down by events that are not actually happening. And in that state of mind we forget who we are, how we've weathered terrible storms in the past and survived. Ruminating on our agitated unstable predictions can blind us to real opportunities that the future may bring. It also exhausts us and robs us of the energy we may need to meet whatever challenges lie ahead.

3. REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE:

What we can be sure will be called on in us, in the future, will be self-agency. Rather than seeing the future through either a dark-muddied or a rose-tinted lens, we need to face out futures with courage and creativity. A "BRING IT ON" attitude to life rather than an unconvincing attempt to 'think positively' and reassure ourselves everything will be fine.

Doing something creative today can change how I think about the future. Without denying how hard I find it not to know what exactly is going to happen in some important area of my life, doing something practical - cleaning, fixing, gardening, meeting up with friends, practicing some skill - activates my creativity and self-agency. I remind myself that I am capable, that I can do things that make a difference. That I am more survivor in spite of all I've been through. Any success, no matter how small, generates different emotions in me, and can give me a different awareness of my relationship with life. Simply by cleaning my room or my shed, I create a more orderly world. This is easier to live in, and it restores my confidence. Making any conscious improvement in my life as it is right now, grounds me and stops me being carried away by fearful predictions.

Uncertainty doesn't have to be a bad thing in my life. It keeps us on our toes. Sometimes it can feel unbearable. But every time I meet uncertainty with an open mind and an open heart, I grow stronger. Accepting and living with uncertainty builds my mental and emotional fitness.

Mark Twain also left us with some good advice when he wrote:

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So, throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."