



McGill Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (MORSL)

MM6: Engaging life: Navigating times of uncertainties in life

Ways to Respond to Experiencing Uncertainty

Sometimes we do not like to live with uncertainty. In fact, we crave certainty in almost the same way we crave for food and other primary rewards. Our brains perceive ambiguity as a threat and try to protect us by diminishing our ability to focus on anything other than creating certainty. Research shows that job uncertainty, for example, tends to take a more significant toll on our health than actually losing our job!

So how can we respond to feelings of uncertainty in healthy ways that support well-being?

- **Acceptance:** We all experience discomfort due to uncertainty. Rather than attempting to resist these experiences, we can practice accepting them. Acceptance is about meeting life where it is and moving forward from there. Acceptance allows us to see the reality of the situation in the present moment and frees us to move forward rather than remaining paralyzed (or made ineffective) by uncertainty, fear, or argument. To choose acceptance does not mean that you will no longer feel frustrated, disappointed or saddened anymore. In fact, a big part of acceptance is accepting how we *feel* about difficult circumstances (and difficult people) in our lives. To be clear, acceptance is not the same as resignation. Accepting a situation does not mean that it will never get better. We do not accept that things will stay the same forever; we only accept whatever is actually happening at the moment. *Practicing acceptance in the face of difficulty is hard, and it is the most effective way to move forward.*
- **Do not believe everything you think:** In uncertain times, it can be helpful to detach from thoughts that argue that worst-case scenarios are bound to happen. It *can* be helpful for us to consider possible scenarios we'd like to prevent so that we can weigh risks, but when we *believe* "what if?" thoughts, we tend to react emotionally as though a worst-case scenario is *already happening* in real life. We grieve for things that we have not actually lost and react to events that are *not* actually happening. This makes us feel threatened, afraid, and unsafe when we are simply alone with our thoughts. When we expect the worst, we often feel too afraid to seize opportunities or respond to challenges with creativity and grit. To counter these thoughts, it can be helpful to recognize them as cognitive distortions (specifically catastrophizing), dismiss them, and counter them with thoughts that are more balanced, reasonable, and open to a wider variety of possible and likely outcomes. Rather than asking: "What if I fail?" you could ask instead, "What if I succeed?" to remind yourself that the future is open and still presents exciting possibilities.
- **Pay attention:** The opposite of uncertainty is not certainty but *presence*. Instead of imagining a scary and unknown future, we can bring our attention to our breath. From there, we can check in with ourselves. Even when it feels like everything is out of control, we can still control what we pay attention to. We can turn off our alerts to keep the news or social media from hijacking our awareness. We can drop our negative fantasies by attending to what is actually happening in our lives, right now, here in the present.
- **Take Personal Responsibility:** Sometimes we look to someone else to give us answers when faced with uncertainty. However, others, be they our friends, family, or therapists,



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are only our supporters and can't offer fix-all advice or make decisions for us. It is important we take personal responsibility for our personal choices and challenges. To best cope with uncertainty, sometimes it is helpful to become more intentional and mindful about any preoccupation we have about problems we are facing. When we loosen fixation on a problem, we can focus on the outcomes we desire. How can we make the best of a difficult situation? What wisdom or benefits can we glean from a situation that is not ideal? When we take responsibility for our lives, we also trade any semblance of power we might have claimed in perceiving ourselves as victims for the real power that comes from moving forward and taking action toward our goals.

- **Find meaning in the chaos:** Social psychologists define meaning, as it applies to our lives, as “an intellectual and emotional assessment of the degree to which we feel our lives have purpose, value, and impact.” We humans are best motivated by our *significance to other people*. We will work harder, longer, better—and feel happier about the work we are doing—when we know that someone else is benefiting from our efforts. Research shows that we feel good when we stop thinking about ourselves excessively and support others.

Meaning and purpose, therefore, are wellsprings of hope. When the world feels scary or uncertain, knowing what meaning we have for others and feeling a sense of purpose can ground us better than anything else can. So, do not just wait for this ordeal to be over. Do not be resigned to your misery while you wait for a solution. What have you always wanted to do? What outcome are you hoping for? How can you make a real life in this?

Finally, it is crucial that we remain hopeful in times of uncertainty. Hope is the energy, the “certainty” that we hold onto that helps protect us from letting uncertainty and the unknown prevent us from doing what we can to make our lives and the world around us better. Individuals who held onto hope amidst ‘floods’ of uncertainty include William Wilberforce, an activist who fought for the abolition of slave trade, Martin Luther King Jr., who fought for civil rights under the banner of love and unity, and most recently Malala Yousafzai who is fighting for girls’ access to education. Yousafzai can see no certain path forward, yet she still moves forward anyway. Hope to create a better world for others can work like fuel that transcends the uncertainty and energizes us to keep going on a purposeful path.

Resources:

- In this video, Prof. Walid Afifi explores the extent to which uncertainty affects our well-being. He also discusses various ways to deal with uncertainty. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFLtl70rB7g> [17 minutes].
- If our brains interpret uncertainty as a threat, like a disease, like something is wrong with us, then why do we still crave significance, meaning, purpose and to change the world when there are no guarantees? Watch Joshua Bailey as he explores this question and more with goal of encouraging us to embrace uncertainty as part of our neurological disposition. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjOS1N5Da1I> (9.33mins).



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- “Gracious Uncertainty”-A devotional reflection from a text in the Christian New Testament by Oswald Chambers: <https://utmost.org/gracious-uncertainty/>

An Excerpt from Tylor Cowan.¹

“We have more feedback today than ever before. Job performance is measured or can be measured in a way that wasn’t true 20 or 30 years ago. If you’re a programmer, it’s not that hard to figure out how good you are. Post what you’ve done on GitHub and the world will want to hire you or they won’t. So, a lot of it is psychological. How can you accept the feedback?”

None of us are actually that great. Life is an experience of being humbled all the time. You can always go online and find someone who’s smarter or better looking or can lift more weights at the gym than you can. Whatever the metric is, unless it’s Magnus Carlsen and it’s chess, there’s always someone better than you. When peer groups were more local in earlier periods of time that wasn’t usually the case. So, you’re either discouraged or you’re re-energised by that.

Attitudinally adapting to never being the best is a new tough challenge brought to us by the Internet. But I see many people up to it. It can be re-energising. It’s exciting how much new stuff there is to learn, so it’s good to be more internally motivated. To be more ‘I want to become something, I aspire to something’ and be less ‘I’m the best at this or that’, because you’re not.

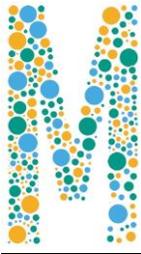
Why should you ever hold an independent opinion on almost any matter? Because there’s someone out there who knows more than you do ... So, one implication is that we should be far less sure about a lot of our opinions ... Be epistemically modest but also be a critical reader. Don’t think you know it all. And if something offends you don’t assume it’s wrong. I’m not saying it’s right, but if you dismiss it you won’t learn from it, so try to be able to learn from almost everything.”

**To find additional Meaning Making
Workshop resources, visit our website:**



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¹ The excerpt is taken from “Thinking About Thinking with Tyler Cowen” hosted by the “The Knowledge Project Ep. #39.” https://fs.blog/knowledge-project/tyler-cowan/#utm_source=shanebreslin.com&utm_medium=shane_breslin.com



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Work sheet- Personal strategies to managing uncertainty

“My strategies”, “Quotes and Affirmations”, “Mindfulness and Spirituality”

