

Navigating Uncertainty



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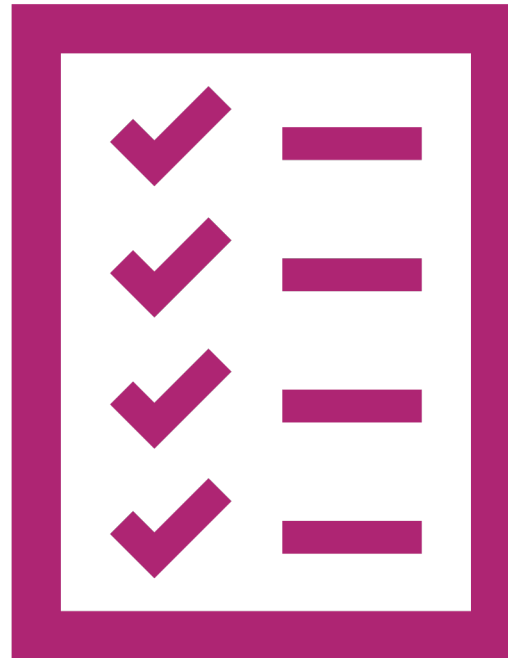
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Associate Director, Counseling Services, CUIMC Student Health on Haven

November 27, 2023

Today's Workshop

Almost all of us feel some level of discomfort with uncertainty, unpredictable events, and circumstances beyond our control. Learn tools that can help you navigate these moments and bolster your mental health. We will discuss why uncertainty can be challenging, lead participants in experiential exercises, and share insights on how to manage discomfort.

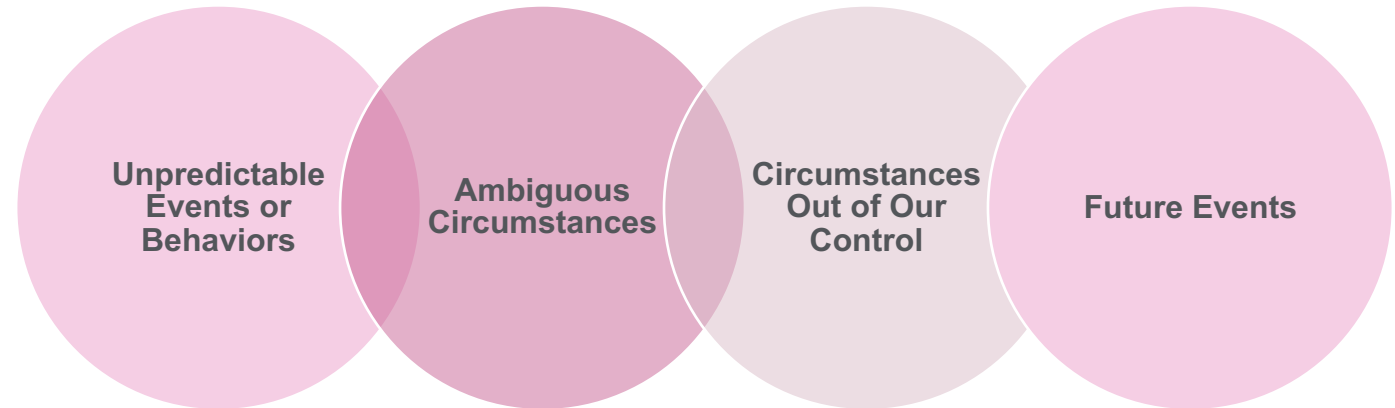
- Defining Uncertainty
- Psychology of Uncertainty
- Common Responses
- The Upside of Uncertainty
- Coping with Uncertainty



Uncertainty

Uncertainty can be defined as:

- **Limited knowledge about an occurrence making it difficult to control, plan, or predict a future outcome**
- Inability to predict our behavior, the behavior of others, or the world around us.
- The aversive feeling that is experienced when one is uncertain about oneself or one's worldviews (van den Bos, 2009)



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van den Bos, K. (2009). Making sense of life: the existential self trying to deal with personal uncertainty. *Psychol. Inq.* 20, 197–217. doi: 10.1080/1047840090333411



Uncertainty in Our Lives

Limited knowledge about an occurrence making it difficult to control, plan, or predict a future outcome:



CAREER



WORK/SCHOOL
PERFORMANCE



WORLD EVENTS



HEALTH



PANDEMIC



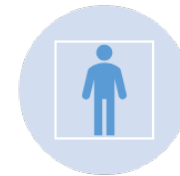
ENVIRONMENT



FINANCES



RELATIONSHIPS



IDENTITY



FUTURE



Check In

In what ways are you experiencing uncertainty in your life?



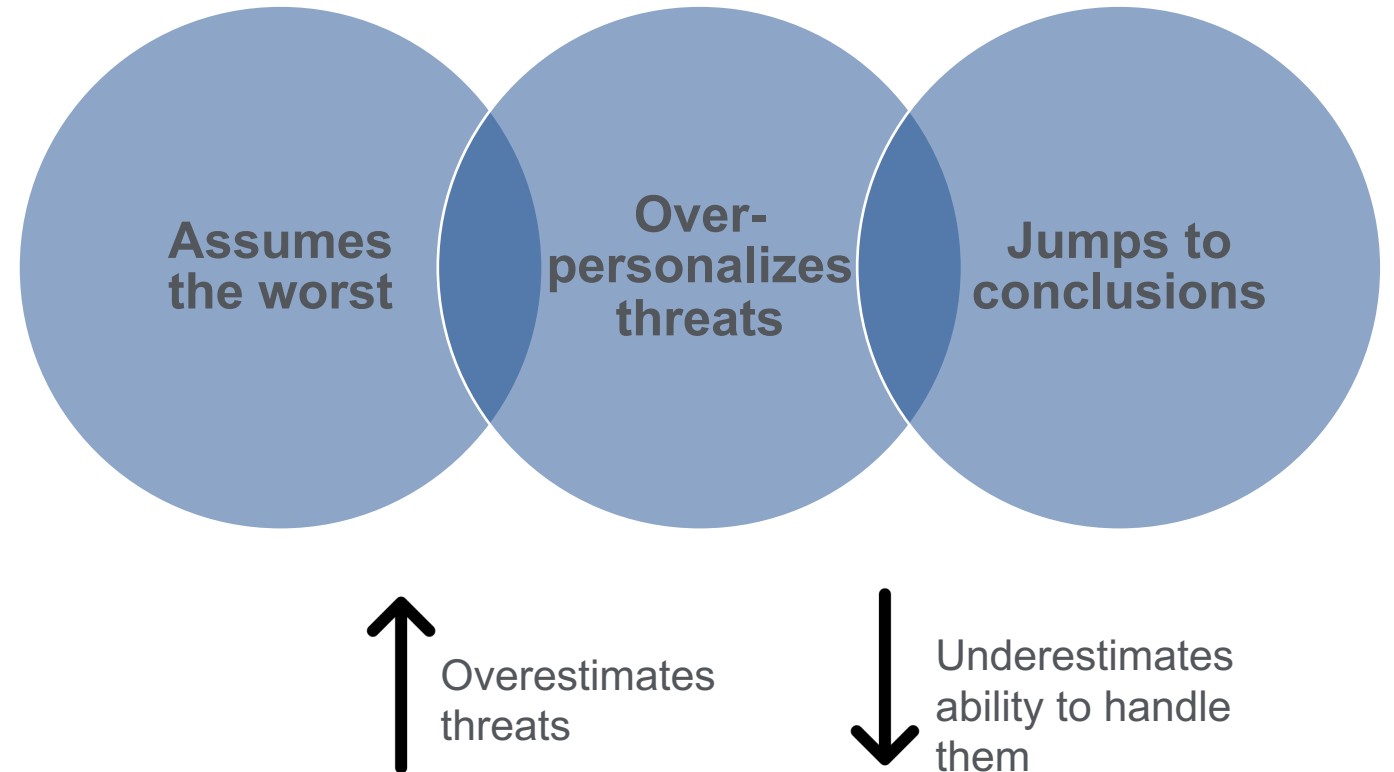
Experiencing Uncertainty

- Can feel like an exciting challenge that you have the resources to deal with or a fearsome threat that you do not have the resources to deal with
- Motivates behavior aimed at reducing uncertainty



Uncertainty

- Your brain is constantly updating your world, making judgments about what's safe and what isn't
- If your brain doesn't know what's around the corner, it can't keep you out of harm's way



Study: Uncertainty and Pain

Uncertainty can cause more stress than inevitable pain

- Found that situations in which subjects had a 50% chance of receiving a shock were the most stressful while 0% and 100% chances were the least stressful
- Knowing that there is a small chance of getting a painful shock can lead to significantly more stress than knowing you will get a shock



de Berker, A., Rutledge, R., Mathys, C. *et al.* (2016). Computations of uncertainty mediate acute stress responses in humans. *Nat Commun* 7, 10996.

Study: Uncertainty and Waiting

We avoid stress associated with the uncertainty of waiting

- Researcher asked participants to play a game that gave them a chance of winning money
- The participants had a choice to know the result immediately, instead of waiting before they find out
 - The immediate knowledge comes with a penalty - if they do win the trial, they will have less chance of winning and the prize will be smaller.
- Despite it being the more rational option, only **37% of the participants** opted to wait on every single trial; most were willing to take a financial hit to avoid waiting in a state of anxiety



Robson, D. (2021). *Why we're so terrified of the unknown*, BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20211022-why-were-so-terrified-of-the-unknown>

Purpose of Uncertainty

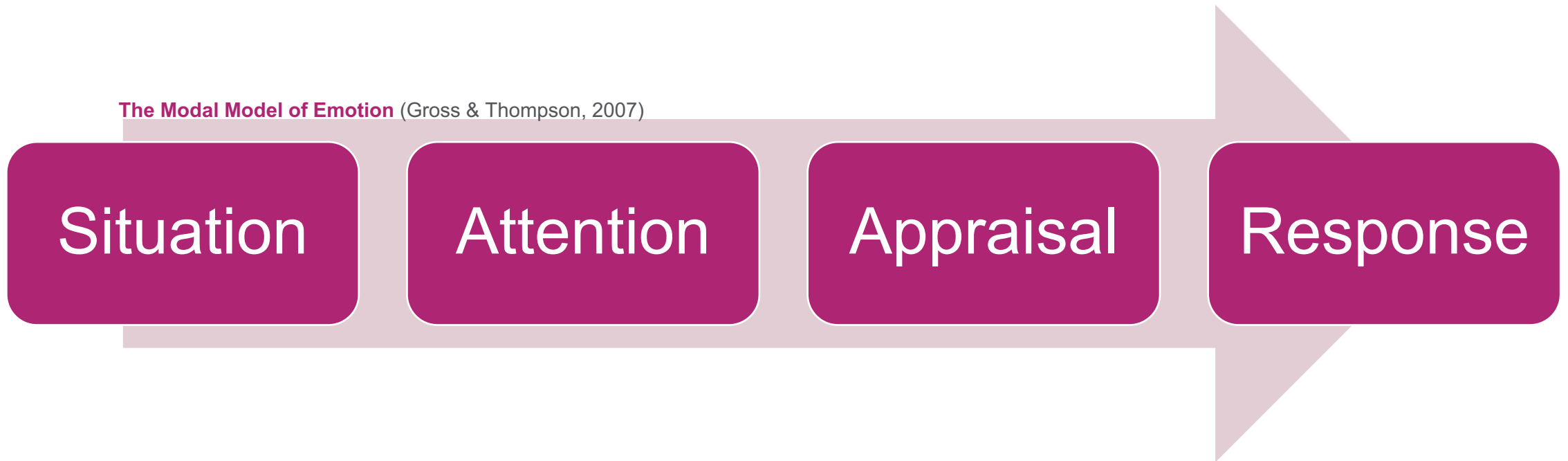
- Brain is trying to predict what will happen next to prepare body and mind in most effective way possible
- Tend to err on the side of caution
 - Avoiding the uncertainty
 - Putting the brain and body in an aroused state that is ready to respond to a changing situation
- **Treating unknowns as potential threats can be adaptive**



Appraisal

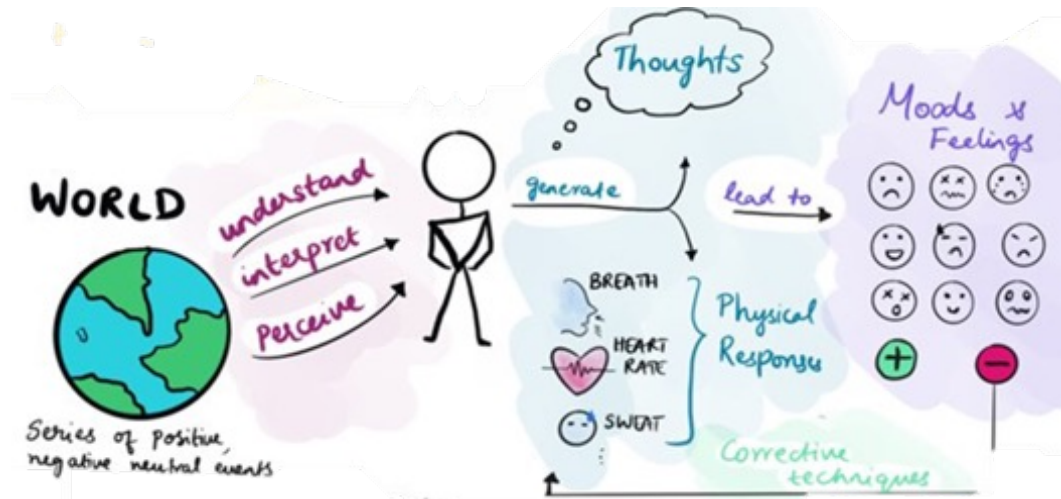
Appraisal is a cognitive process used to determine whether a stressor is a **danger** (threat) or **opportunity** (challenge) and to evaluate the availability of coping resources to respond to the stressor.

The Modal Model of Emotion (Gross & Thompson, 2007)



Anderson EC, Carleton RN, Diefenbach M and Han PKJ (2019) The Relationship Between Uncertainty and Affect. *Front. Psychol.* 10:2504. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02504
Franks HM, Roesch SC. Appraisals and coping in people living with cancer: a meta-analysis. *Psychooncology.* 2006 Dec;15(12):1027-37. doi: 10.1002/pon.1043. PMID: 16602072.
Gross, J. J., & Thompson, R. A. (2007). Emotion Regulation: Conceptual Foundations. In J. J. Gross (Ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation* (pp. 3–24). The Guilford Press.

Subjective Appraisal of Uncertainty



Appraisal is a cognitive process used to determine whether a stressor is a danger (threat) or opportunity (challenge) and to evaluate the availability of coping resources to respond to the stressor

Appraisal variables

Goal
relevance

Goal
congruence

Coping
potential

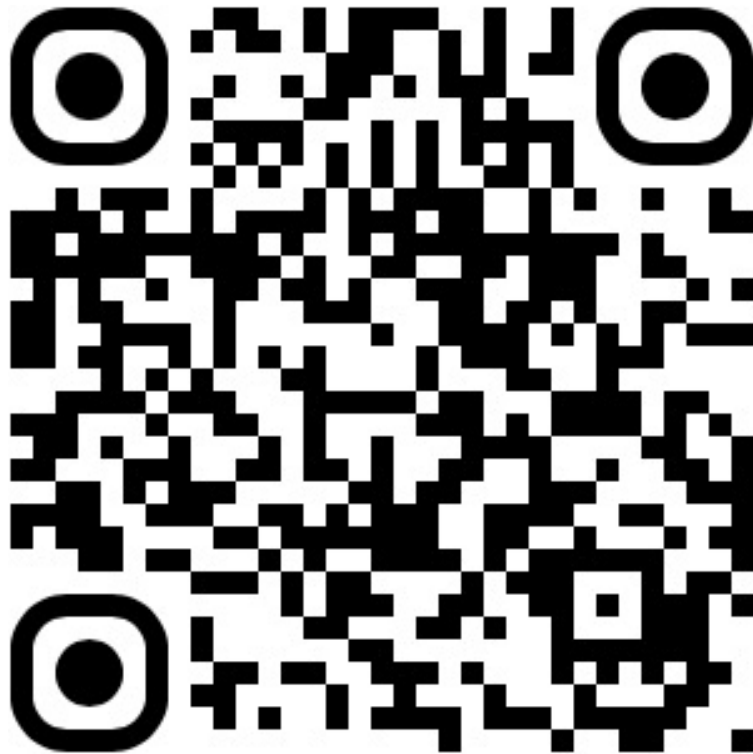
Agency

People have different responses to the same situation

Franks, H.M., & Roesch, S.C. (2006). Appraisals and coping in people living with cancer: A meta-analysis. *Psycho-Oncology*, 15, 1027–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pon.1043>

Check In

Rank your list of uncertainties with #1 being the event or occurrence associated with most stress or distress.



HYPERAROUSAL

Excessive activation/energy in the form of fight/flight responses



WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Optimal zone where you can deal with stress from everyday life

— — SMOOTH SAILING

● DYSREGULATION

— — FIGHT/FLIGHT/FREEZE

HYPOAROUSAL


Freeze response, emotionally flat, lack of energy and response





Intolerance of Uncertainty

- **Intolerance of uncertainty** is the tendency to react negatively to uncertain situations on a cognitive, emotional, and behavior level due to a set of negative beliefs about uncertainty and its implications (Buhr & Dugas, 2009)
 - Believe uncertain situations are stressful and should be avoided
 - May lead to inability to act
 - Strongly linked to excessive worry and a significant predictor of distress
- **Intolerance of uncertainty** and **intolerance of emotional arousal** are the main variables underlying anxiety
 - Elevated level of intolerance of **uncertainty** provokes reactions of hypervigilance when individuals are faced with uncertain or ambiguous problems
 - Elevated level of intolerance to **emotional arousal** stimulates cognitive avoidance reactions
- Excessive anxiety results from a hypervigilant state or a state of avoidance

 Ladouceur, R., Gosselin, P., & Dugas, M. J. (2000). Experimental manipulation of intolerance of uncertainty: A study of a theoretical model of worry. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 38(9), 933–941. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967\(99\)00133-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967(99)00133-3)


Coping Styles

Avoidant Coping

- Behaviors individuals engage in to avoid thinking or having feelings about a stressor
 - Distraction
 - Venting
 - Disengaging

Approach Coping

- Behaviors individuals engage in to actively cope with stressor
 - Finding emotional support
 - Cognitive reframing
 - Acceptance

 Carnahan, N., Carter, M., Sbrocco, T. (2021) Intolerance of Uncertainty, Looming Cognitive Style, and Avoidant Coping as Predictors of Anxiety and Depression During COVID-19: a Longitudinal Study. *Int J Cogn Ther.*, 15(1). doi: 10.1007/s41811-021-00123-9.

Common Responses to Uncertainty

- Uncertainty causes us to feel like things are out of our control
- Nature and level of uncertainty plays a role in physiological and behavioral responses
- Responses to uncertainty differ based on individual, cultural, and community factors



✓ Sweeny, K, Dooley, MD. The surprising upsides of worry. *Soc Personal Psychol Compass*. 2017; 11:e12311. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12311>
<https://caps.umich.edu/article/coping-uncertainty#:~:text=Another%20common%20response%20to%20uncertainty,feeling%20fear%2C%20lack%20of%20sleep.>

Anxiety/Worry

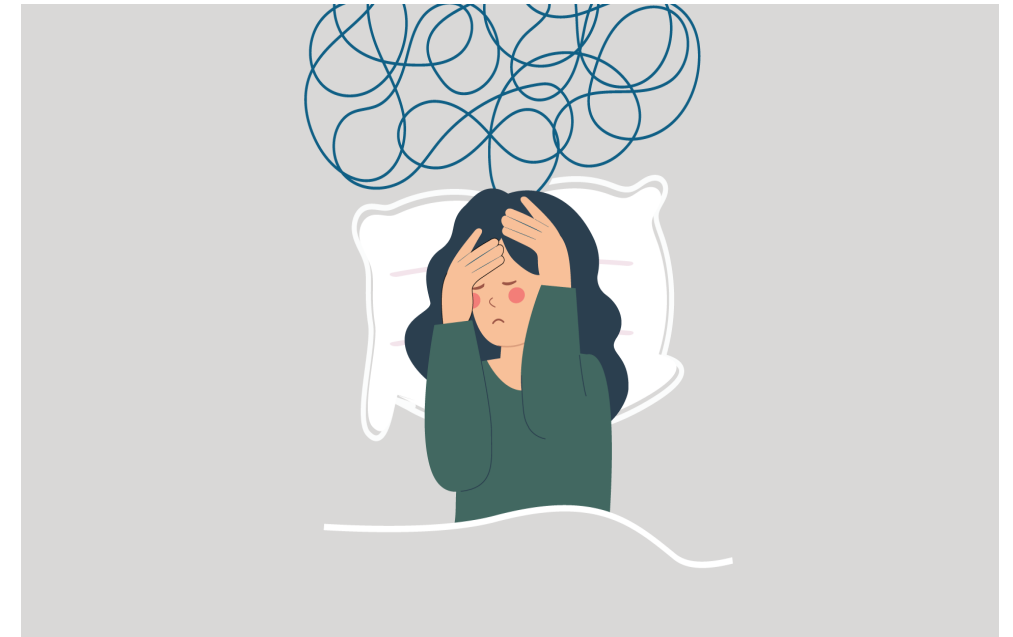
- Inability to tolerate uncertainty
- Anxiety is a feeling of fear, dread, or unease and another common response when faced with uncertainty
- Symptoms of anxiety can include rumination, intrusive thoughts, racing thoughts, irritability, and an inability to focus
- Correlation between intolerance of uncertainty and anxiety, worry, stress
 1. A tendency to define ambiguous situations as threatening
 2. An elevated estimation of risk
 3. A tendency to generate negative scenarios in uncertain situations
- High worriers are slower to make a decision when confronted with ambiguous stimuli



✓
Ladouceur, R., Gosselin, P., & Dugas, M. J. (2000). Experimental manipulation of intolerance of uncertainty: A study of a theoretical model of worry. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 38(9), 933–941. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967\(99\)00133-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967(99)00133-3)

Hypervigilance/Avoidance

- Develops as an adaptive cognitive strength in order to detect threatening activity in the environment
- Heightened state of awareness of
 - Surroundings
 - Thoughts and feelings of people around you
 - Own body and mind
- Brain trying to predict and prevent unforeseen events/circumstances by identifying cues and avoiding threatening stimuli



Low Mood/Depression

- Depression is identified by persistent sadness/low mood, loss of interest in previously pleasurable activities, disruptions in sleep and appetite, difficulty focusing, and lack of motivation for two weeks or longer
- Low mood and/or depressive states can be normal when faced with uncertainty
- Ruminating on low mood/depression may contribute to longer stretches of negative mood



Nolen-Hoeksema, S., & Morrow, J. (1991). A prospective study of depression and posttraumatic stress symptoms after a natural disaster: The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61(1), 115–121.

Cognitive Distortions

- Negative thought patterns that can cause us to perceive ourselves, others, and situations inaccurately



The Upside of Uncertainty and Worry

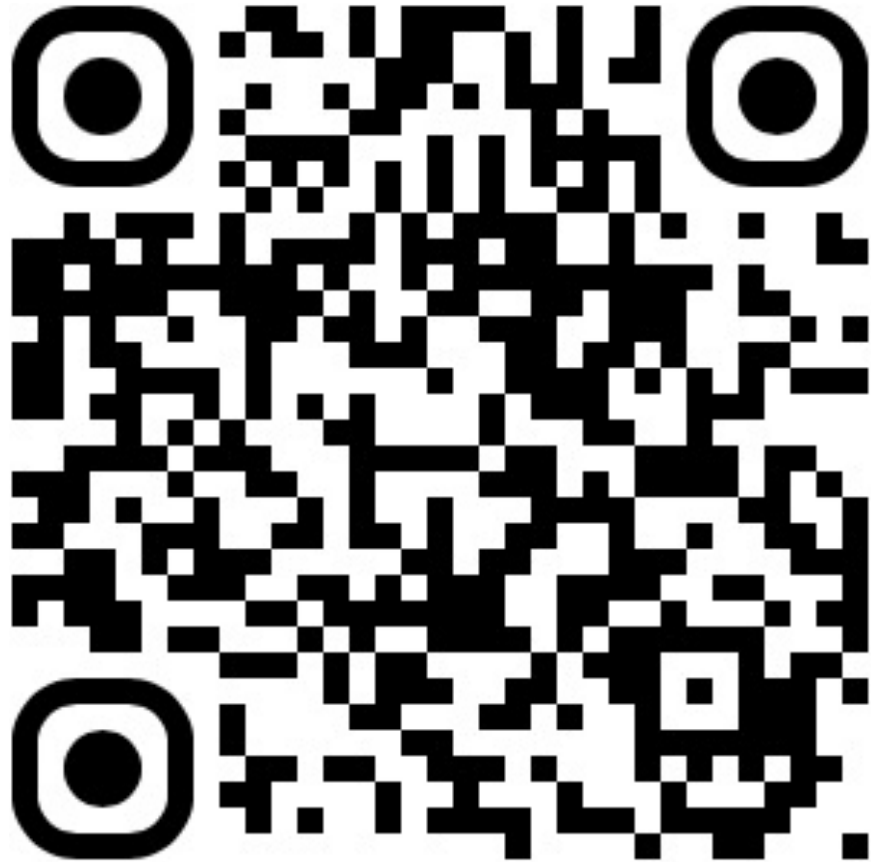
- Moderate amounts of worry can be motivating
- Worry can cue efforts to actively manage the unpleasant emotional state
- Encourages us to remain curious
- Encourages motivation to take action to address an issue



✓ Sweeny, K, Dooley, MD. The surprising upsides of worry. *Soc Personal Psychol Compass*. 2017; 11:e12311. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12311>

Check In

How do you cope with stressors?



Focus on What You Can Control



Radical Acceptance

- Conscious effort to acknowledge and honor difficult situations and emotions
- Fully accepting things as they are, instead of ignoring, avoiding, or wishing the situation were different
- Critical step in moving through a difficult experience to experiencing more meaning



- Agreement/approval
- Giving up
- Not doing anything

Not accepting



It is raining

*I do not like rain. I wish it was not raining.
My day would be better if it was not raining.
My day is ruined. Every day is just like this.
It is always like this. Why does it always
rain when all I want is for it to be sunny?*

vs

Accepting

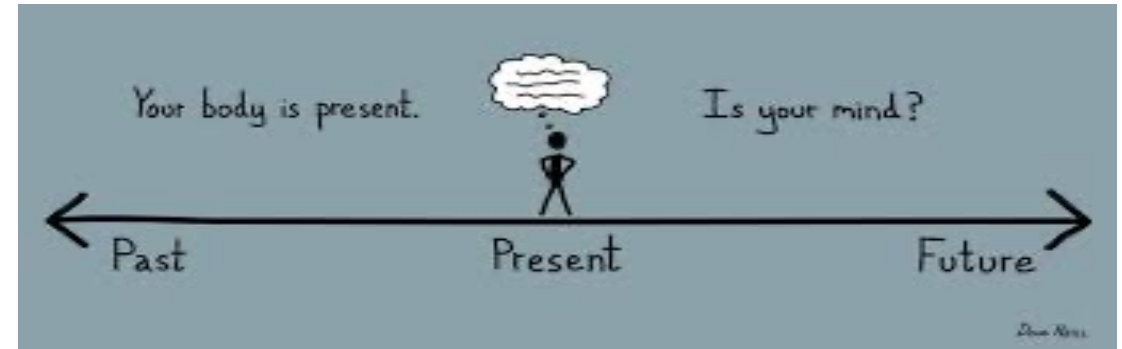


It is raining

Yep – it is raining.

Mindfulness

- The quality or state of being conscious or aware of something or the present moment
- Assists us in putting distance between ourselves and our emotions/reactions
- Critical step in moving through a difficult experience to experiencing more meaning
- **The Basics of Mindfulness Practice**
 - Set time and space aside
 - Remain aware of and return to the present moment again and again
 - Let go and dismiss negative self-talk and judgements



<https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/>

Grounding

- Grounding strategies help calm symptoms of anxiety and help us focus on the present moment
- **333 Rule**
 - Name 3 things that you can see
 - Name 3 things you can hear
 - Name 3 things you can touch or move

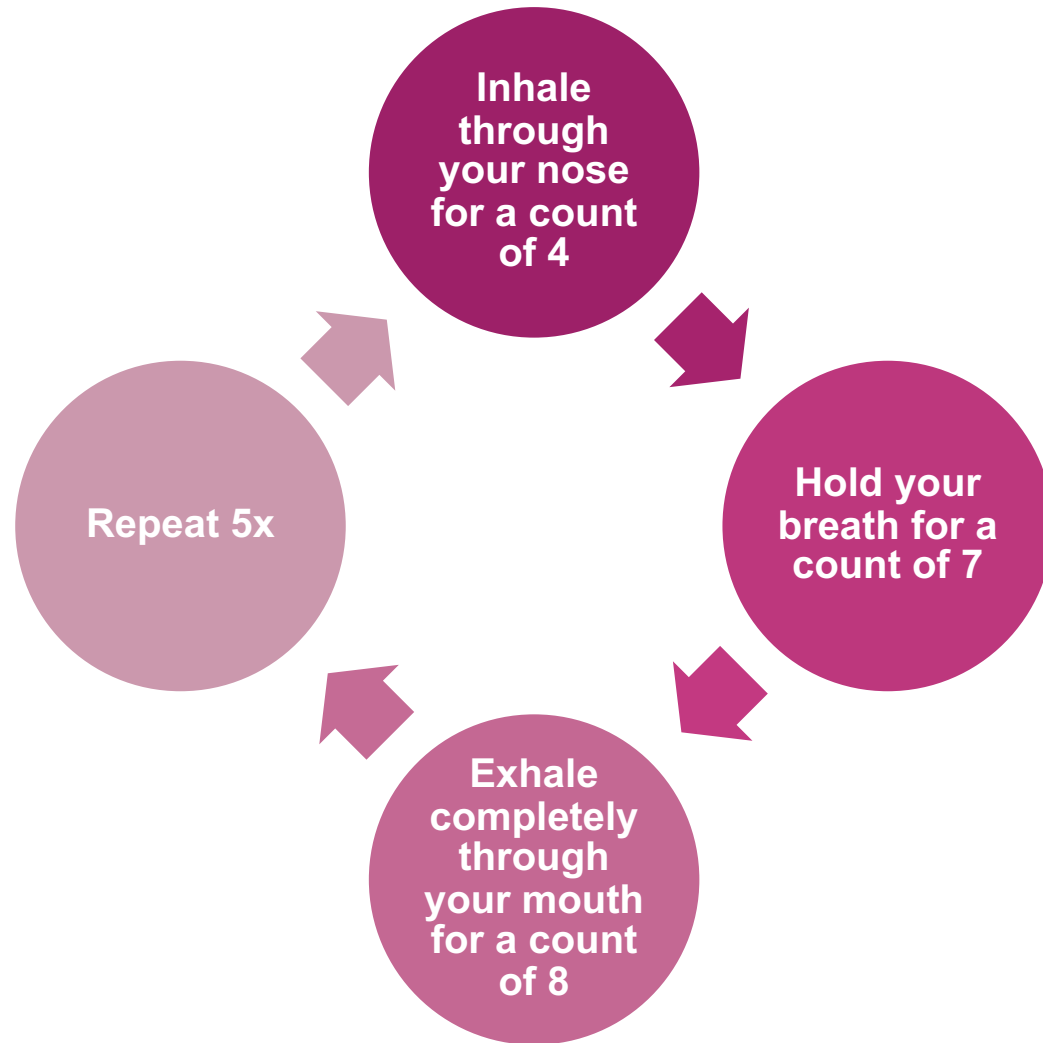
STEP 1: Focus on 3 things you can see

STEP 2: Focus on 3 things you can hear

STEP 3: Focus on 3 things you can touch or move

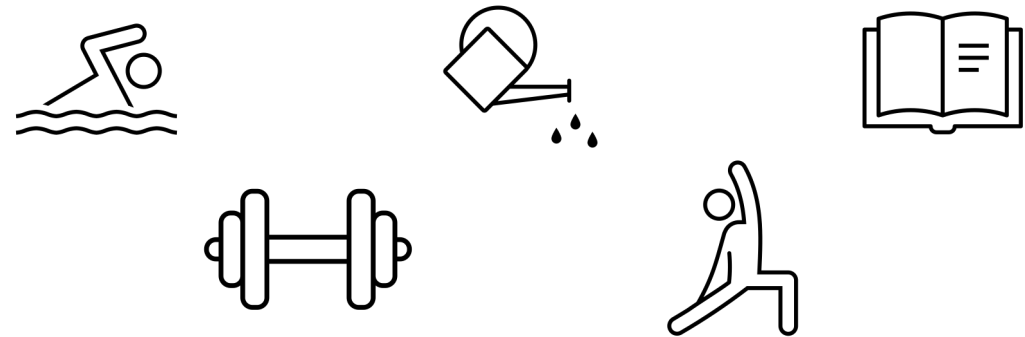
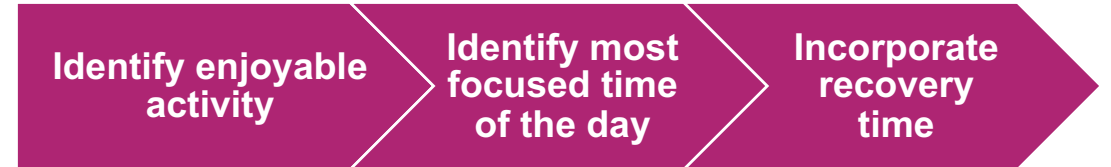


Deep Breathing



Flow

- Flow is a state of complete immersion in one activity
- Engaging in self-reported flow-inducing activities boost an individual's sense of well-being during a period of uncertainty and makes waiting a bit easier
 - Challenge-skill balance
 - Clear goals
 - Concentration
 - Sense of control



<https://positivepsychology.com/flow-activities/>

Self-Soothing Strategies

SELF-SOOTHING

Self-soothing is a quick and effective way to reduce the intensity of negative emotions.



Sight

- Low lighting
- Soothing colors
- Sleeping masks
- Coloring books
- Pinterest Collages

Touch

- Soft things
- Cuddle things
- Massage
- Hot/cold shower
- Heated/weighted blanket



Sound

- Calming noise
- ASMR videos
- Nature sounds
- Guided meditations
- Binaural beats



Smell

- Aromatherapy
- Fresh air
- Candles/incense
- Comforting smells



Taste

- Strong flavors
- Warm drinks
- Eat slowly
- Nostalgic flavors



www.blessingmanifesting.com



Self-Care

Be kind to yourself

Focus on past successes

Focus on what you can control

Develop new skills

Limit exposure to triggering events when possible

Ask for help



Self-Compassion

- Self-compassion is the process of turning compassion inward
 - Being kind and understanding to ourselves
 - Giving ourselves support and encouragement



Mindfulness

Being aware of the physical, emotional, or mental pain of the moment.



Self-kindness

Treating ourselves with kindness, considering our own needs.



Common Humanity

Recognizing that these experiences are a normal part of being human.



Coping Statements



Reframing

- **Reframe uncertainty as a catalyst for growth**
 - “This is an opportunity for ___.”
 - “Maybe ___ will happen”
 - “I will focus on what I can control.”
 - “This is uncomfortable but I can handle it.”
 - “This feeling is a reminder to slow down.”
 - “I give myself permission to take breaks.”
 - “I can choose my thoughts.”
 - “I can take things one step at a time.”



Check In: Key Takeaways

What are your key takeaways from today?

What strategies will you try to help you cope with uncertainty?



Student Health on Haven Counseling Services

Team of psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurse practitioners, and psychiatrists



Short-Term Psychotherapy
and Psychiatric Treatment



Skills and Support Groups



Referrals to Long-Term
Providers



One-Off Support Sessions



Telus Health Student Support


- FREE app offering 24/7 access to short-term counseling support
- Accessible from anywhere in the world
- Support via chat and phone in 60 languages
- Linkage to ongoing care with providers located around the world



**Scan to learn more about
Telus Health**



Appointment Scheduling



Appointments and Services

Important details on how to connect with our providers and services

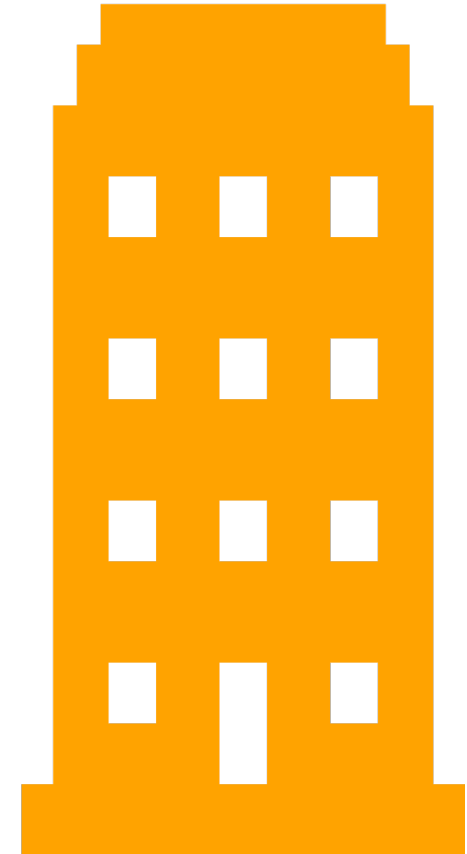
[Learn the Latest](#)

Schedule an appointment via the Student Health portal



(212) 305-3400

Call 24/7 to reach our on-call clinicians and after-hours care



Our offices are located in Tower 2
100 Haven Avenue, 2nd/3rd Floors



Connect with Student Health On Haven on Instagram



[HEALTHONHAVEN.CUIMC](https://www.instagram.com/healthonhaven)





For more information visit
studenthealth.cuimc.columbia.edu



One Minute Meditation



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jholcb8Gz0M&t=90s>

References

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