



Managing the Uncertainty of 2020

From your AFA EAP

Life is filled with uncertainty, especially at times like these. While many things remain outside your control, your mindset is key to coping with difficult circumstances and facing the unknown.

The role of uncertainty in life

Uncertainty is all around us, never more so than today. The current COVID-19 pandemic has heightened uncertainty over the economy, employment, finances, relationships, and of course, physical and mental health. Yet as human beings, we crave security. We want to feel safe and have a sense of control over our lives and well-being. Fear and uncertainty can leave you feeling stressed, anxious, and powerless over the direction of your life. It can drain you emotionally and trap you in a downward spiral of endless “what-ifs” and worst-case scenarios about what tomorrow may bring.

We’re all different in how much uncertainty we can tolerate in life. Some people seem to enjoy taking risks and living unpredictable lives, while others find the randomness of life deeply distressing. But all of us have a limit. If you feel overwhelmed by uncertainty and worry, it’s important to know that you’re not alone; many of us are in the same situation at this time. It’s also important to realize that no matter how helpless and hopeless you may feel, there are steps you can take to better deal with uncontrollable circumstances, alleviate your anxiety, and face the unknown with more confidence.

Learning to cope with uncertainty

To cope with all this uncertainty, many of us use worrying as a tool for trying to predict the future and avoid nasty surprises. Worrying can make it seem as if you have some control over uncertain circumstances. You may believe that it will help you find a solution to your problems or prepare you for the worst. Unfortunately, chronic worrying can’t give you more control over uncontrollable events; it just robs you of enjoyment in the present, saps your energy, and keeps you up at night. The following are few tips to consider in developing healthier ways to cope with uncertainty.

Tip 1: Take action over the things you can control

Much about life is uncertain at the moment—and many things remain outside of your control. But while you can’t control the spread of a virus, the recovery of the economy, or whether you’ll have a pay check next week, you’re not totally powerless. Whatever your fears or personal circumstances, instead of worrying about the uncontrollable, try to refocus your mind on taking action over the aspects that are within your control.

By focusing on the aspects of a problem that you can control in this way, you'll switch from ineffective worrying and ruminating into active problem-solving. Of course, all circumstances are different and you may find that in some situations all you can control is your attitude and emotional response.

Tip 2 Actively deal with your emotions

When circumstances are out of your control, it's easy to become overwhelmed by fear and negative emotions. When you can do nothing else about a situation, you can still actively face your emotions—even the most negative and fearful ones. If you allow yourself to feel fear and uncertainty, they will eventually pass. Focus on the present moment and your breathing and allow yourself to simply feel and observe the uncertainty you're experiencing. Take some slow, deep breaths or try a meditation to keep you anchored in the present.

Tip 3: Identify your uncertainty triggers.

Some uncertainty can be generated by external sources, especially at times like this. Reading media stories that focus on worst-case scenarios, spending time on social media amid rumors and half-truths, or simply communicating with anxious friends can all fuel your own fears and uncertainties. Notice what scenarios or people raise your anxiety levels and try to reduce your exposure to them.

Tip 4: Focus on the present

Uncertainty is often centered on worries about the future and all the bad things you can anticipate happening. It can leave you feeling hopeless and depressed about the days ahead, exaggerate the scope of the problems you face, and even paralyze you from taking action to overcome a problem.

One of the surest ways to avoid worrying about the future is to focus on the present. Instead of trying to predict what might happen, switch your attention to what's happening right now. By being fully connected to the present, you can interrupt the negative assumptions and catastrophic predictions running through your mind.

Tip 5: Seek assistance

The uncertainties of our time are new to all of us. There is no ready template to instruct us how to navigate them. Be open to asking for help. Your AFA EAP is just a phone call away. We are ready to help and we are confidential. You can access your local EAP committee members by calling 800-424-2406 or www.afacwa.org/eap.