

Scottish autism

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Coping with Uncertainty

By Peter Vermeulen

The main task of the human brain is to predict what will happen to us, so it can tell the rest of our body what to do to survive. Therefore, our brains crave predictability. The brain hates uncertainty because in moments of uncertainty the brain cannot do its job properly: protecting us and taking care of our wellbeing.

Life is not completely predictable. It is always a bit uncertain. But now, with the Covid-19 pandemic, life is more uncertain than ever. There are so many things we don't know and that we cannot predict:

- Will they find a vaccine? Soon? When?
- Will we ever go back to normal? And if not, what will the 'new normal' look like?
- Will there be a second wave?
- Will I get infected? Will my loved ones catch Covid-19?
- What about the economy? Is my job at risk as well?
- Will we have to wear face coverings for the rest of our lives?
- What is the time scale for the easing of restrictions? And what if the rate of infections goes up again?

So many questions remain unanswered. Every time a new phase with new measures starts, new questions and new uncertainties arise.

That is why uncertainty is now probably a bigger threat for our physical and mental wellbeing than the virus itself. We are facing an amount of uncertainty that is much bigger than what most of us can cope with. This heightened uncertainty makes many of us anxious and stressed. But above all of this, it makes many people feel powerless. We may feel like we have lost control over our own life and that things are happening to us, in unpredictable ways.

That is the bad news.

But here is the good news.

The human brain has an excellent capacity for learning. Maybe you've heard about it: brain plasticity. This means that your brain can learn to deal with this heightened uncertainty and gain confidence again. And this will make you feel less anxious and stressed.

Here are a couple of things you can do, to teach your brain to deal with all the current uncertainties.

Accept that uncertainty is a natural part of your life

Don't try to fight against your uncertainty and the anxiety and stress it causes. Without fear you would be dead by now. Fear, anxiety, stress are not nice to experience but they are warning signs that we are in danger and should take action. Therefore, it is good that you experience your own anxiety. Don't try to avoid it or run away from it. Accept your stress as a guide that tells you to do things to cope with what causes your stress.

A coping strategy that is natural when it comes to uncertainty is trying to find answers and solutions. We start thinking about all possible outcomes and what we could do then. We think of worst case scenarios. We look for more information, thinking that knowing more will take away the uncertainty. We start thinking 'what if' and imagine worst case scenarios. In order to be prepared for the worst. We all know this as 'worrying'.

Worrying is a natural reaction of the brain: trying to predict the future, so we are better prepared for the challenges ahead. Gathering information and thinking about all the possible outcomes also gives us a feeling of control. But all of this is an illusion.

We can never have full control over the future. No matter how much and how often you worry, you won't be able to control the outcome of events. Worrying will only make you feel worse, but because it makes you forget about the good moments in your life. And while you are worrying you cannot do something that would give you joy and pleasure instead.

It is hard not to worry, so don't try not to worry. It won't work. But you can become the manager of the worry-department of your brain. Some tips:

- **Organise your worry time:** schedule your worry time and connect the worrying to a specific place in the house, preferably not a place where you do daily activities such as eating or watching TV. Pick a chair in a spare bedroom, in the garden shed, the garage. Go there to worry when you planned it. And worry.
Guess what: it won't work. Worrying on command is hard to do. Stay there a couple of minutes and then go back to business as usual. If you catch yourself worrying spontaneously during the day, go to the worry place and continue. Again, you will notice that the worrying stops. This is how your brain learns that it can control its own worrying department.
- **Plan and limit the time you search for information** about the pandemic. Don't try to check the opinions and forecasts of all the experts out there. The more information you will get, the more things you will discover that are uncertain. You will end up with more new questions than answers.

- **Avoid people who only talk about the pandemic.** Especially the ones who are generous with pessimistic and negative stories. Look for the optimistic people in your environment who tell you that everything will be OK. Even if you don't believe them, their optimism will help you not to worry too much. Emotions can be contagious. Try to get infected with optimism rather than the virus.
- When you meet other people, online or face (mask) to face (mask), **organise the talking about the pandemic.** If necessary, use the timer on your smart phone and agree that the talking about the pandemic will be limited to (for instance) 15 minutes. Anyone mentioning the pandemic after that has to pay a small fine. With all the money collected that way, treat yourself and the other people with something nice.
- Worrying is always about the future. **Focus on the present.** Because the present is certain. This is what some people know as mindfulness. But even if you are not familiar with mindfulness, you can still refocus your attention by engaging in so-called 'flow activities'. These are activities that require your attention but you love doing them, even so much that you forget about time and place. A flow activity could be reading a good book, watching a comedy or an exciting movie, exercising, making your favourite meal etc.

It may seem impossible to accept uncertainty, but you already did it your whole life. Nobody knows his or her path in life at birth. Every time you go out of the door, things could happen that are unpredictable. How sure were you about your time of arrival at work when commuting? How certain were you about how your children would grow up? How sure were you about the relationships you started? Were you sure that your food was not going to make you sick every time you ordered a meal in a restaurant? No.

Face it: you have coped so far with all the uncertainties in life. Now there are only more of them, but uncertainty is not new to your brain. So, trust yourself that you will learn to survive this time of uncertainty as well. And know also that negative emotions, like anxiety, usually go away if you allow them.

Accepting uncertainty does not mean you cannot do things and make a plan. Even when there is uncertainty, it is possible to make a plan. But one that focuses on what you *can* control.

Focus on what you can control

In the online session 'How to become your coach', I introduced **the control chart**. In that chart you list the things that are uncertain and completely out of your control (e.g. how long it will take before there is a vaccine), the things you can control by yourself (e.g. how often you check the latest news about the pandemic) and the things you can control with support from other people (e.g. your stress levels, your negative and anxious thoughts).

Focus on the things you can control. For instance: you cannot be 100% certain about getting infected, but you can reduce your personal risk. You decide how often you meet other people, who you meet, how close you stand to other people. You cannot control other people respecting the physical distancing rule, but you can walk away from them if they get too close, you can decide to always wear a face mask when you go out, have your hand gel with you all the time and wash your hands regularly. Maybe there is uncertainty about when you will be able to do your favourite sport again or go to the theatre, but what you can control is whether you engage in other physical exercise activities and how often, and also how you get some cultural input without going to the theatre.

Instead of a control chart, you could also make a **certainty chart**. Take a piece of paper. Draw a vertical line in the middle. On the left side you write something that is uncertain, e.g. will the curve continue to flatten? For every item you write on the left side, write something on the right side that is certain. For instance: after Summer there will be Autumn. Yes, there are many uncertainties in life now, but it is not hard to find even more certainties. This helps to avoid the typical absolute thinking that leads to anxiety and stress, namely: all is bad, nothing is certain nowadays, it will only get worse. The world doesn't operate in absolutes.

Avoid becoming a control freak

There should be a balance between focusing on control / certainty and accepting uncertainty. Because the human brain likes being in charge and to have control, some people focus too much on trying to control things.

For instance, they do not only focus on their own behavior but they try to control the behavior of the people around them as well. In this way their brain tries to make the behaviour of those people more predictable. This might seem to be a good plan. The thing is that most people don't want to be controlled by other people. **Limit your control actions to yourself and accept the uncertainty of other people's behaviour.** So, if you can only manage your anxiety by staying home (avoiding any risk of getting infected), you can decide that for yourself, but you cannot oblige the people around you to do the same.

Some people try to control themselves too much. They want to be perfect in their coping strategies. **Allow yourself to make mistakes** in this time of uncertainty. Most of us have never experienced this amount of uncertainty for such a long period. It is nothing more than human that we all make mistakes from time to time in coping with this Covid-19 crisis.

Some people check things all the time: the number of infections, possible new measures, if loved ones are still safe. It is amazing how many emails and text messages now start with "Are you still OK?" Or: "I hope you are well and safe." Again: we think that the more we check, the more predictable the world becomes. But that is again an illusion. **Don't try to check everything.**

Some people procrastinate. Because the situation is uncertain, they hesitate to make decisions. They wait until things become certain again. Every decision we take now is a bit more risky than in times of great certainty. Should I buy new shoes now, if I

could lose my job? Should I travel to my relatives abroad if I risk getting caught there? Should I allow my children to play with other kids? Again: we all make mistakes. But we do know that people who are about to die and who reflect on their life almost never regret the things they did and the decisions they took in their life but they regret the things they *didn't* do in their life. You can never be certain about the consequences of your decisions. But you cannot be certain either that it will lead to a bad outcome.

If you are the kind of person who can easily become a control freak, **teach your brain that surprises and not knowing or controlling can be fun as well.** Because not all uncertainty is bad. Start with small surprises that you organize yourself (again: balance between control and uncertainty). For instance: if you have planned to buy yoghurt in the shop, take the 4th product from the left that is on the shelf. If you have planned to watch a movie on Netflix, you choose the category (thriller, drama, comedy...) and you ask a family member to say a number. If he/she says 12, then you watch the 12th movie on the list of the category you chose. You will have some bad luck with these uncontrolled choices, but you will also experience some very nice surprises. And this is how you train your brain that uncertainty and having no control is not always bad.

Challenge your own (negative) thinking

In times of uncertainty, the door is open to negative thinking. When the outcome is uncertain, it is easy to assume negative outcomes: that things will stay bad or even go worse: the economic impact will be so huge that many people will lose their job, mental health issues will only get bigger, there will be a second wave that will hit even harder, etc.

But is this actually going to be the case? If the future is uncertain, the only certainty there is, is that we don't know the outcome. **Bad outcomes are as likely as good outcomes.** There is a saying: never waste a good crisis. We already see that many people say that the pandemic also had some positive effects on their life. Some people realise that we were all caught in a rat race and that it was a good thing to stop the treadmill and start taking care of things that are more important than their career, going to parties, travelling to the other side of the globe. Every time you are thinking about a bad outcome, force yourself to add a sentence that starts with 'but' and then add something positive. Yes, we don't know when there is going to be a vaccine, but there have never been so many researchers involved in searching for a vaccine and for all the previous viruses they found one. If you find it hard to correct yourself into some positive thinking, delegate the task and recruit a 'but person', one who adds a positive note to every negative assumption you make about the future. End every day with saying three positive things about that day.

And even if you are considering bad scenarios because the outcome is uncertain, you can still make plans for them. Write down **'what if' scenarios.** For instance: what if I will lose my job? Write down the things you *can* do when you lose your job. What if school won't reopen? Write down what you can do, what teachers then can

do, etc. Don't try to write the perfect plan. Don't look for solutions that you are 100% sure they will work. If the future is uncertain, you cannot make a perfect plan. Include whatever comes to mind that could help you get by. The more you find the better, because they can cover several outcomes. If you don't find solutions, ask other people what they would do. Two know more than one. Writing down these 'what if' scenarios will give you a feeling that you are prepared for when these events would happen. It will increase your feeling of control and that will lower you anxiety and stress. Once you've made your plans, put them away. You have a plan now. Don't try to change or upgrade it all the time. Focus on other things and on the present.

Manage your anxiety and stress: learn to relax yourself

Even if you follow all the tips mentioned above, it is normal to experience more stress and anxiety now, because of the heightened uncertainty.

It is a good idea to plan your relaxation time. And to engage in activities that drag you away from worrying and feeling anxious about all the uncertainty.