



Manage Your Fear of Uncertainty

By Mandy Ellis

HOW LONG will the lockdowns last? Will the virus make a resurgence this fall? And how will COVID-19 affect the real estate market long-term? These are just a few of the many questions we keep asking — and, frustratingly, still cannot answer. The emotions fear and uncertainty — in no short supply these days — hit our survival instincts hard, according to Michele Quintin, licensed clinical social worker and owner of Shift Happens Therapy. When we experience these emotions, she says, we instinctively process them as if we're being threatened. The longer we're stuck sitting with fear and uncertainty, the more likely we are to develop chronic mental health conditions.

A recent study from the University of Illinois at Chicago found that fear of the unknown is linked with several anxiety disorders, including panic disorder, social anxiety disorder and specific phobias. Says Heidi McBain, licensed marriage and family therapist: "Fear and uncertainty can be so overwhelming

because people can feel like their lives are now out of their control."

And during this pandemic, even the time-honored strategy for managing these emotions — therapy — can be emotionally difficult. McBain notes that therapy typically focuses on being grounded in the present, which "can be hard when people are quarantined and their everyday lives don't feel safe or normal to them."

Although we have no way of controlling what's going to happen, we are in control of how we deal with the current circumstances. We may not be able to manage the uncertain future, but by focusing on a few simple strategies, we can manage our fear of that uncertainty.

Name It to Tame It

Quintin says naming your feelings is the first step to managing them: facing the fear of uncertainty you're experiencing and sharing it with someone who can

empathize without exacerbating it. By acknowledging the feeling, you're bringing it into the light and will be better able to work through your reaction, as well as create a plan to move forward.

Experience Feelings Throughout Your Body

"When you're feeling fear of uncertainty, you're going to feel that in your body," explains Quintin. It may show up in the form of nervous energy, fast heart rate and breathing, or muscle tension. Experts advise to first lean into your feelings, then soothe their effects on your body.

This could be achieved by moving the intense feeling around your body through exercise or dancing, or "paying attention to your breathing and [taking] deep slow breaths," says Quintin. "Mental health isn't not feeling fear of uncertainty. It's about being able to cope with that when it comes up and moving through into a more balanced, grounded state."

Experiment With Worst-Case Scenarios

Humans have a bias toward worst-case-scenario thoughts when feeling fear and uncertainty, says Quintin. Rather than push them down, she encourages clients to play these thoughts out alongside best-case and medium-case scenarios. "It's tapping into your resiliency and ability to meet those challenges," she says. "At the same time, we need to be able to expand that picture and realize that most of the time, the worst-case scenario doesn't actually play out."

Become More Comfortable With Uncertainty

Developing the skill of being flexible to changing circumstances can serve us well, says Quintin. People who lean into uncertainty and cultivate the mentality that they can figure it out no matter the circumstance are "the ones who are able to

not only survive those situations, but come out of them with a sense of accomplishment, even a sense of thriving having overcome adversity."

If you don't feel like yourself, can't cope with your emotions or can't complete your daily activities, don't be afraid to reach out for help, says McBain. "The earlier you reach out for help, the sooner you can start to feel better. Most therapists have moved their practices online, which means you can look for a licensed therapist in your state, not just someone in your immediate area."

How capable you feel of coping with the fear of uncertainty is the most important factor in how your mental health is impacted. Says Quintin: "The more you know about how to feel those feelings inside yourself, the more strategies you have to actively respond to the fear of uncertainty, the better off you're going to end up feeling."

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