



Tolerating Uncertainty

When we are anxious, we tend to over-estimate the danger and the odds of bad things happening, and we under-estimate our ability to cope if or when those bad things happen. Even if the odds are really small that a bad thing will happen, that tiny chance is enough to upset us. We call it “intolerance of uncertainty”. We might think things like “I just can’t cope with not knowing”, “I have to be 100% certain”, “uncertain events are almost always bad”, so “I must prepare for each uncertain event”.

These thoughts make us feel anxious, so we try to reduce the uncertainty by worrying about it – by planning and preparing for the possible negative future event. However, although we think worry helps us feel better and helps us feel more in control, it doesn’t reduce the risk of the possible negative event happening. Sometimes we even think it would be better if the bad thing happened right now, because that would be better than living with the uncertainty.

We might increase certainty by planning and preparing each worst case scenario, by seeking reassurance from others, by checking a looking things up on the internet, by avoiding certain things, putting things off or making excuses, or we might try to keep busy so that we don’t think about the uncertain future.

However, worrying doesn’t affect the future outcome, we cannot prevent all bad things from happening and life remains uncertain. By worrying about what MIGHT happen, how does that affect us right now? Worrying seems like the best thing to do, but it only makes us feel worse and makes us less able to cope with real life.

We can deal with uncertainty in two main ways. We can **challenge our need for certainty** by looking at the advantages and disadvantages of needing to be certain and how it affects us. We can explore other areas of our lives in which we do tolerate uncertainty, or look at how other people deal with uncertainty, such as friends or characters in television programmes. We can deliberately do things that we are uncertain about to help us get used to uncertainty, such as taking a different route home... trying anything new.

The other way is to learn to **tolerate uncertainty** – to reduce our need for certainty. And we can do this using the acronym: **APPLE**.

APPLE

ACKNOWLEDGE – Notice and acknowledge the uncertainty as it comes to mind.

PAUSE – Don't react as you normally do. Don't react at all. Just pause, and breathe.

PPULL BACK – Tell yourself this is just the worry talking, and this apparent need for certainty is not helpful and not necessary.

LET GO – Let go of the thought or feeling about needing certainty. Tell yourself it is only a thought or feeling. *Don't believe everything you think!* Thoughts are not statements of fact. They will pass. You don't have to respond to them. You might imagine them floating away in a bubble or cloud.

EXPLORE – You can explore the present moment, because right now, in this moment, we are okay. *Notice your breathing*, and the sensations of breathing. Notice the ground beneath you, look around you and notice what you see, what you hear, what you can touch, what you can smell. Right now. Then *shift your focus of attention* to something else – on what you need to do, on what you were doing before you noticed the worrying thought, or *do something else* – mindfully, with your full attention.

