

# DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY

## A learning guide for all UN staff members

Prepared by

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### DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY

Our world is filled with uncertainty. Uncertainty of the future can produce anxiety or insecurity in people, or cause them to avoid upcoming events or new relationships, jobs or projects. It can make people freeze, keeping them in old jobs they dislike or relationships that are unhealthy. And it can make them overreact to unfamiliar threats such as terrorist attacks. On the positive side, uncertainty can keep people alert and inspire them to prepare for challenges, and to be careful when they are in unfamiliar surroundings. We can't control every aspect of life, but we can introduce a degree of certainty. This guide will provide you with information and simple self help tips to deal successfully with uncertainty.

### WHAT CAUSES UNCERTAINTY

Uncertainty exists when details of situations are ambiguous, complex, or unpredictable; when information is unavailable or inconsistent; and when people feel insecure in their own state of knowledge. Because it is primarily a self-perception based on one's own thoughts a person who believes himself or herself to be uncertain is uncertain. Some causes of uncertainty include:

- Not knowing how to do a job
- Not knowing how to manage others
- Receiving vague or inconsistent instructions
- Not knowing what will be wanted from you in the future
- Not knowing what your boss or colleagues think of your abilities

### RESPONSES TO UNCERTAINTY

There are many responses people can have when faced with uncertainty. Some will launch a "pre-emptive strike" and give up their goals rather than deal with the uncertainties inherent in their situation. Some will revise their dreams and tell themselves they don't really want to pursue the things they actually desire. Some people will experience a kind of emotional paralysis when they feel they are living in the "no-man's land" of not knowing what the future holds for them. It may be hard to make long-range plans about finances, vacation, retirement, and the like, and to order other priorities when the future is so unknown.

### TIPS TO HELP YOU LIVE WITH UNCERTAINTY

**Think realistically.** How you feel and act is largely determined by the way you think, not by the things that happen to you or by the actions of others. That is, your moment-by-moment thoughts, which usually represent deeply believed attitudes or philosophies, "cause" you to feel and act as you do. Use the following steps and questions to help you arrive at a more rational and balanced appraisal of the situation.

Step 1. Be aware of what you are saying to yourself.

- What is going through my mind?
- For example: "I'm petrified that a terrorist will blow up the building where I work."

Step 2. Challenge any fear-producing thoughts, perceptions or evaluations.

- Does this thought make any sense? Is it logical? Am I being realistic?
- Am I personalizing the fear too much? Is there a clear and present danger?
- Have I received warning signals that support my fear?
- Is there a history or precedent to support the fear?

Step 3. Replace your negative thoughts with reinforcing self-statements. Examples:

- Just because something could happen doesn't mean it will.
- I'll focus on the present, which I can control, not on the future which I can't.

**Raise your tolerance level for frustration.** Make a list of things you typically avoid, situations, events, thoughts, risks and so on. Commit yourself to face at least one of these each day. Instead of trying to get away from frustration or discomfort as you normally would, stay with the discomfort until it diminishes of its own right.

**Stop confusing the concepts of possibility and probability.** *Possibility* refers to the fact that a certain event can in fact take place, regardless of how slim the chances really are. *Probability*, on the other hand refers to the likelihood that a certain event may occur beyond the pure chance. For example, it is quite possible that while flying in an airplane, it could collide into another airplane or crash on landing. The chances of this happening, however, are slight. It could happen, but it probably will not. You need to make a distinction between legitimate concerns and appropriate worries, and those that are unrealistic and irrational. Avoid predicting that something bad will happen, just because you are certain.

**Limit the problem.** The level of anxiety can be correlated to the degree of uncertainty multiplied by the importance of the situation (i.e., Uncertainty x Importance = Level of anxiety). In order to lower your level of anxiety you need to take a good look at the importance and uncertainty associated with the event. You need to do the following: (1) Generate ideas that will help you lower the uncertainty of the situation. This can be done by doing all you can to gain information. The more you know about a situation, the better you can prepare yourself to deal with it. (2) After gathering as much information as you can, generate ideas that will make the event less important or stressful to you. For example, by altering the way you conceptualize the event you find stressful (viewing it as a "challenge" instead of a "threat," or an "opportunity" instead of a "crisis,") you can actually make it feel less threatening and stressful. If you can reduce either factor in the equation, you can reduce your anxiety.

**Compare your problems and worries to others less fortunate than yourself.** How do your problems compare to people who live in war torn countries? How do your problems compare to people facing hunger, terminal illness and poverty. Reflect on these things and this should give you some perspective on your problems.

**Increase your tolerance for the unknown.** Life is a continual process of facing the unknown. We all live in a world of unknowns. Every moment is in some way new and unknown. If you resist the ambiguity of the moment ("I need to know"), you're going to create more ambiguity. Accept that your immediate future will inevitably entail many new situations and that uncertainty is bound to be present.

**Look at the world without fear.** Don't allow yourself to get trapped into a situation by thinking there's no way out. In truth, we are more frightened than the circumstances warrant. The worst seldom happens. This is not to say the worst cannot happen, just that it usually doesn't. Our troubles spring more often from what we imagine and fantasize than from our external reality.

**Live your life fully.** Living in the present, rather than worrying about an uncertain future contributes to the richness of your experience. Re-evaluate priorities so you have little remorse or regrets about what might have been. Accept the fact that life is full of risks and opportunities and that you can't have one without the other.

**Avoid obsessional thinking.** Make a distinction between productive worry, which helps you to plan or motivate yourself, and non-productive worry, which mainly serves to make you miserable. When you worry needlessly, you overestimate the threat or risks associated with uncertainty, and you underestimate your resources for handling it. Remain calm and do not openly speculate on anxiety-producing events. Ask yourself whether there is really anything to worry about and if so, if your worry will be helpful in any realistic way. Over 95% of what we worry about never happens.

**Avoid an information overload.** Be aware of what's going on in the world, but don't be anxious about it. Most of the things people allow themselves to get worked up about in life are simply not worth the toll it takes on their physical and emotional bodies. Realize that things can change from day to day.

**Learn acceptance.** Basically, we can find ourselves in two types of unpleasant situations, ones we can change and ones we cannot change.

1. If you can change the situation, you should do something about it instead of getting upset. Not acting in such a situation will cause frustration in the end.
2. If you cannot change the situation, you will have to accept it. If you don't, it will only lead to frustration and a negative and unpleasant state of mind, which will make the situation only worse.

**Avoid catastrophizing.** In this frequently occurring irrational belief, you distort the magnitude and proportion of a situation or event and then exaggerate the importance and implications of that situation. Catastrophic thinking, such as "This is a terrible disaster" or "I can never get through it" creates a strong stress response. A more realistic thought might be "This is unpleasant, but I'll be able to cope."

**Manage your health.** Living with uncertainty is tiring and can diminish your resources. Regular exercise, a healthy diet, avoiding noxious substances and getting adequate sleep are all important factors in coping with the stress of uncertainty.

### **A CONCLUDING NOTE**

As previously mentioned, nothing in this world is for certain. We have to live our lives knowing that we cannot know for sure what will happen tomorrow. We can make our plans and construct our daily routines, but in the end, we can never know what tomorrow will bring. Consider the following story. Two sailors ran into each other in a pub. One told the other about his last voyage:

"After a month at sea, we discovered our masts had been eaten through by termites!"

"That's terrible," said the second sailor.

"That's what I thought, too," said the first sailor, "but it turned out to be good luck.

As soon as we took the sails down to fix the masts, we were hit with a squall so suddenly and so hard, it would have blown us over if our sails were up at the time."

"How lucky!"

"That's exactly what I thought at the time, too. But because our sails were down, we couldn't steer ourselves and we were blown onto a reef. The hole in the hull was too big to fix. We were stranded."

"That is bad luck indeed."

"That's what I thought too when it first happened. But we all made it to the beach alive and had plenty to eat. And on the island, we discovered a buried treasure!"

As the story illustrates, you don't know if an event is "good" or "bad" except maybe in retrospect, and even then you don't really know because life keeps on going. Just because something hasn't turned out to be an advantage yet doesn't mean it's not ever going to. Therefore, you can simply assume that whatever happens is "good." If you think an event is good, it's easy to maintain a positive attitude. And your attitude affects your health, your energy level, the way people treat you, and how you treat others. A good attitude is a good thing. So get into the habit of saying, "That's good!" Since you don't know for sure whether something will eventually work to your advantage or not, you might as well assume it will. It is counterproductive to assume otherwise.

If someone cuts you off on the highway, say to yourself, "That's good!" They may have saved you from getting into an accident down the road. Or maybe because you slowed down, you meet a friend you would have missed. The truth is: Life is uncertain. And even that can work to your advantage.

### **STRESS COUNSELLOR SERVICES**

The Stress Counsellor offers support and assistance to staff in resolving work or personal related concerns. Through a range of sensitive and innovative services, the Stress Counsellor seeks to enhance the emotional and physical health, well-being and job-performance of all staff members. For further information and practical advice on how to manage stress, visit the Stress Counsellor web page on the OHCHR Portal.