

Intolerance of Uncertainty

Understanding why not knowing can increase anxiety | A practical, research-informed companion guide

What does intolerance of uncertainty mean?

Intolerance of uncertainty (IU) describes a tendency to experience the possibility of unknown outcomes as distressing, threatening or difficult to bear. Uncertainty is not itself a sign of danger: it is a normal feature of everyday life. However, when the mind treats not knowing as unacceptable, it may work hard to predict, prevent or resolve every possible problem. This can increase worry even when no immediate threat is present.

IU is a psychological tendency rather than a diagnosis. People differ in how they respond to ambiguity, and responses can vary with exhaustion, stress, previous experiences, culture, support and the situation. It is especially studied in generalised anxiety, but may be relevant across several anxiety presentations.

The research model

Researchers including Michel Dugas and colleagues have described how negative beliefs about uncertainty can contribute to excessive worry. A person might think, “If I cannot be certain, I cannot cope,” or “I must check again before I decide.” The mind then searches for certainty through repeated planning, checking, reassurance seeking or avoidance. These actions can briefly reduce discomfort, yet sometimes prevent learning that uncertainty can be tolerated.

A common cycle

1. Uncertain event: A manager asks to speak tomorrow, without saying why. **2. Threat interpretation:** “Something must be wrong.” **3. Anxiety:** Tension, racing thoughts, difficulty concentrating. **4. Safety response:** Repeatedly rereading messages, asking colleagues, imagining every outcome. **5. Short-term relief:** A reassuring reply helps for a moment. **6. Return of doubt:** “But what if they do not know either?” The cycle may restart.

Why certainty is an impossible goal

No one can predict every conversation, bodily sensation, deadline or social response. Trying to eliminate all uncertainty can consume time and attention, reduce flexibility and make ordinary decisions feel unusually risky. The aim is not to become careless or stop sensible planning. It is to distinguish useful preparation from endless attempts to obtain a guarantee.

Reflection: recognising your pattern

Think of a recent uncertain situation. What did you know for certain? What did your mind predict? What did you do to feel safer? Did the action help you solve a real problem, or did it lead to another round of doubt? Leave space for your answers in a notebook or use the interactive guide.

How uncertainty affects everyday life

Thinking and attention

Uncertainty may pull attention towards possible threats. People can find themselves replaying conversations, researching extensively, checking the same details or mentally rehearsing worst-case scenarios. These habits may make it harder to concentrate on work, study, relationships or rest. Not everyone responds with visible worry: some become very quiet, delay decisions or appear unusually perfectionistic.

Emotions and physical sensations

Anxiety can accompany uncertainty with irritability, restlessness, muscle tension, a racing heart, disturbed sleep or a sense of urgency. These experiences are real, but they do not establish that a feared outcome is likely. Physical symptoms should not automatically be attributed to anxiety; new, severe or concerning symptoms warrant appropriate medical assessment.

Behaviour: checking, reassurance and avoidance

Checking facts once can be practical. Repeated checking after no new information has appeared may become a way of managing distress rather than resolving the issue. Similarly, asking for support can be healthy; seeking repeated guarantees about unknowable outcomes may keep the cycle going. Avoidance may look like postponing an application, refusing an invitation or delaying a decision until the “perfect” answer arrives.

Workplace and neurodivergent contexts

Unclear instructions, sudden timetable changes, inconsistent expectations and unpredictable feedback can create genuine access barriers. For autistic people, people with ADHD, or anyone with processing and communication differences, predictability and clear information may be reasonable supports rather than unnecessary reassurance. The aim is not to remove essential adjustments. It is to reduce avoidable uncertainty where possible while building choice and confidence around the uncertainty that remains.

Example: waiting for a reply

A person emails an important request and receives no response. They might check the inbox repeatedly and assume rejection. A balanced approach could be to agree a reasonable follow-up date, turn off unnecessary notifications and return attention to other tasks. The absence of a reply is information about timing, not proof of a negative outcome.

Worksheet 1: map a real situation

Situation: _____

Facts I know: _____

What I am predicting: _____

What I feel in my body: _____

What I usually do: _____

One alternative response: _____

Worksheet 2: helpful preparation or certainty seeking?

Choose a behaviour such as checking, planning, asking, researching or avoiding. Ask: Does this action give me new information? Is it proportionate to the decision? Can I set a reasonable stopping point? What would I do next if certainty remained unavailable?

Practical ways to respond to uncertainty

1. Name the unknown without turning it into a prediction

Try: "I do not know the outcome yet." This is more accurate than "Something bad will happen." You do not have to force a positive prediction. A neutral statement leaves room for several possibilities and helps separate facts from fears.

2. Separate controllable actions from uncontrollable outcomes

You may be able to prepare questions, request clearer instructions, gather relevant facts, make a plan or ask for an adjustment. You cannot control every reply, opinion or future event. Focus on the next useful action rather than repeatedly trying to settle what cannot yet be known.

3. Practise small, chosen experiences of not knowing

If it is safe and appropriate, try a manageable experiment: send a low-stakes message without rereading it several times; choose between two ordinary options without prolonged research; wait a short, planned period before checking a non-urgent update. Notice what happens to anxiety over time. Gradual practice should be collaborative, voluntary and adapted to disability, trauma history and individual needs.

4. Reduce the cost of worry

Set a practical limit on research or checking when no new information is likely. Write down a concern and identify whether action is possible today. If not, return to a valued activity, grounding practice or rest. A breathing or grounding exercise can make distress more manageable, but it does not need to make uncertainty disappear before you continue.

5. Build supports, not unrealistic guarantees

Ask for written expectations, advance notice of changes, clear response times, accessible communication and realistic deadlines where these are needed. Shared plans and supportive relationships can reduce unnecessary demands. A useful support plan includes what to do if an outcome is disappointing, not just how to prevent disappointment.

Worksheet 3: my uncertainty support plan

One uncertain situation I want to approach: _____

What matters to me in this situation: _____

One useful preparation step: _____

A checking or reassurance limit I choose: _____

Support or adjustment I can request: _____

What I can do if the outcome is difficult: _____

Review after one week

What did I learn about my predictions? Which actions genuinely helped? Did I need additional accessibility support? What would I like to try differently next time? Progress is not measured by never feeling anxious; it can mean making room for uncertainty while continuing to act in a way that matters to you.

Evidence and further reading

Dugas, M. J., Gagnon, F., Ladouceur, R. & Freeston, M. H. (1998). Generalized anxiety disorder: A preliminary test of a conceptual model. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 36, 215–226. Carleton, R. N. (2016). Into the unknown: A review and synthesis of contemporary models involving uncertainty. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 39, 30–43.

Educational information only; not a diagnosis or a substitute for individual clinical advice.