

Managing Uncertainty and Distress

What is Uncertainty?

Uncertainty is the experience of not knowing what will happen next. As a student, this can come from academics, relationships, future plans or the world around you. While uncertainty is a normal part of life, it can become distressing when it feels constant or indefinite.

Research shows that difficulty tolerating uncertainty may be a key factor in many anxiety disorders or depression. Because uncertainty is a normal part of everyday life, learning how to manage it in healthy ways is important for your mental and emotional wellbeing.

Some Areas Where Uncertainty May Show Up for Students

- **Academic Distress:**

A dominant stressor for university students. Related to grades, deadlines, exams, performance pressures. This type often leads to worry, overthinking and even burnout as individuals try to predict or control results.

- **Future Uncertainty:**

Uncertainty about life direction, career paths, finances, plans after graduation and long-term outcomes that have yet to occur. This type of uncertainty can increase motivation and goal seeking behaviours even if it is uncomfortable.

- **World Event Distress:**

Distress caused by current or unpredictable global events (politics, conflict, crises), often intensified by constant media exposure and lack of personal control. It can lead to chronic worry and emotional exhaustion.

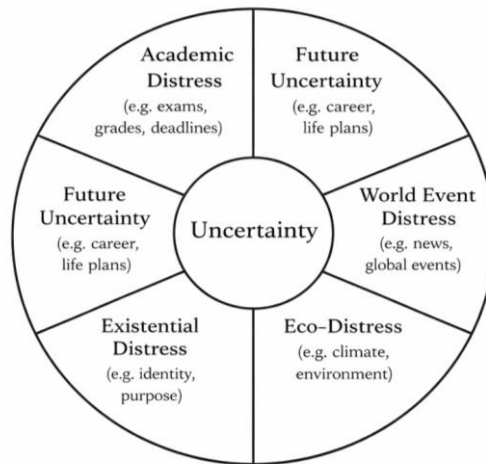
- **Eco-Distress:**

Distress related to uncertainty about climate change and environmental futures, involves feelings of anxiety, grief, or helplessness. Reflects both long-term uncertainty and limited individual control over outcomes.

- **Existential Distress:**

Uncertainty about identity, purpose or life direction, often experienced during periods of transition. It can feel deeply personal and is linked to emotional wellbeing.

Where is Uncertainty showing up for you?



- > What areas of your life currently feel most uncertain?
- > Highlight or note the areas that feel most relevant to you right now.

Reflection: Now that you've learned about some areas where uncertainty might show up, take a moment to think about some of these questions and reflect on how they apply to you.

- ✓ How does uncertainty show up for you (behaviours, emotions, thoughts, physical sensations)?
- ✓ How do you usually respond to uncertainty and distressing thoughts; do you avoid it, try to control it, or sit with it?
- ✓ What is one recent situation where you felt uncertain? What did you do in this situation and how did it turn out or make you feel?
- ✓ What is one small step you could take to face uncertainty rather than avoid it?
- ✓ What would you say to a friend who is dealing with uncertainty and distress? Could you tell yourself the same?
- ✓ Who in your life can you turn to when uncertainty feels overwhelming?

Common Patterns to Watch For

- Overthinking or obsessive/spiralling thoughts
- Avoiding situations that feel unclear
- Rushing decisions just to feel certain
- Seeking constant reassurance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling stuck or unmotivated
- Emotionally overwhelmed

Coping and Building Tolerance for Uncertainty

1. **Focus on what you can control:** Uncertainty can lead us to focus on things we can't control. For example, if following the news feels overwhelming, consider setting limits on how much time you spend on news websites rather than avoiding it completely.
2. **Reduce information overload:** Constant exposure to news and social media can increase distress. Set boundaries: put your phone on Do Not Disturb at specific times, take intentional breaks, or reconnect with the world around you.
3. **Manage worry:** Notice when you are in a "what if" mindset or experiencing spiralling thoughts. Use grounding techniques, focus on the present, or change your location to interrupt the cycle.
4. **Regulate your body:** Calming your body can help settle your mind. Try slow-paced breathing or use cold water (splash your face, hold a cold pack or dunk your face in cold water) to quickly calm down.
5. **Distract yourself:** When distress becomes overwhelming, shifting your focus away from the feeling might be more helpful than fully experiencing them. Try calling a friend, going for a walk, cleaning, listening to loud music, or using sensory strategies like holding ice in your hand or eating sour candy.
6. **Lower the scale:** When things feel uncertain, focus on the present day rather than the future. Set small, achievable tasks to refocus and ground your attention.
7. **Acknowledge emotions and connect:** Validate how you're feeling and consider connecting with others who share or understand your concern.
8. **Practice acceptance:** Remind yourself of what is within your control and what is not. Accepting that you cannot control everything can reduce the urge to overcontrol.
9. **Build tolerance gradually:** Practice sitting with discomfort without immediately trying to fix it. Try the sandwich method where you do something pleasant before and after a challenging or distressing situation. This can increase your capacity to deal with and manage distress.

10. Try new experiences: Engaging in unfamiliar situations like a new activity (ex: workout class, social event, new restaurant) or having a conversation with someone new can help strengthen your tolerance over time.

You don't have to navigate uncertainty alone. While short-term uncertainty is normal, it's important to recognize when your thoughts become distressing; in those moments, try shifting your attention to the present or engaging in a helpful distraction.

Finding small moments of peace and calm with friends, family and in places is the key to managing distress.

If the distress feels persistent, counselling can help you process how you're feeling, so consider reaching out to campus wellness services:

https://www.uwo.ca/health/psych/book_an_appointment.html

Resources

<https://www.helpguide.org/mental-health/anxiety/dealing-with-uncertainty>

<https://psyche.co/ideas/uncertainty-is-stressful-but-heres-why-we-need-to-feel-it>

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10409990/>

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9169886/#s3>

<https://mountainsidewellness.ca/blog/why-global-events-can-leave-us-anxious-hopeless-and-overwhelmed-and-what-we-can-do-about-it>

<https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/resource/understanding-and-coping-with-eco-anxiety/>

<https://mcgraw.princeton.edu/undergraduates/resources/academic-stress>

<https://www.guelphhumber.ca/news-events/news/what-existential-distress>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886921001859>

<https://steps-centre.org/publication/what-is-uncertainty-and-why-does-it-matter/>

<https://cmha.ca/news/mental-health-in-uncertain-times-what-to-do-when-everything-feels-shaky/>