



## Coping with Uncertainty: Finding your own Style

Uncertainty is unavoidable in our lives. *Will it rain or snow tomorrow? Will the trains be running on schedule?*

Some people live with some uncertainty. *Will my children be safe? How will I manage the budget?*

Others live with much. *What will be the results of the next medical tests? Will I have enough money to cover groceries this week? Will my son serving in Iraq make it to his next visit home?*

And, as our society faces economic upheaval and as the global sense of security wanes, we are all affected with increased uncertainty. *Will my bank stay open? Will we face another terrorist attack? What will happen to my life savings?*

No matter our circumstances, uncertainty is a part of our lives. We may experience uncertainty about what events may impact us or our loved ones today, tomorrow or fifteen years from now. People facing financial and medical hardships may be faced with a larger degree of uncertainty. In the face of such challenges, even getting out of bed in the morning is a form of positive coping.

There are many ways to cope positively with uncertainty, and it is most important for individuals to find what works for them. The following is a list of methods/approaches/techniques that can be used to help with feelings of uncertainty. Experiment with several to find out which ones appeal to you and help you cope best:

- ❖ The **Worry Box** technique is useful when worries become repetitive and unproductive. It is common for worries to “take over” especially at night when you may be trying unsuccessfully to fall asleep. Write down key phrases that describe your worries on small pieces of paper. Put them into a box, and place it in the freezer. Leave it there overnight. When the thoughts come to your mind, remember, they’re in a deep freeze! Let them stay there.
- ❖ **Grounding** can be used to help re-connect with the *here and now*. Worry can lead us to become distracted and unable to focus on the task at hand. Taking a moment to “ground” ourselves can help in coping with uncertainty. *Physical grounding: Sit in your chair, feel your feet on the ground and your back against the chair. Visual grounding: Look around the room and make note of everything with the color red (or another color).*
- ❖ When stress takes a physical and emotional toll, we can take a minute to relax with a **breathing exercise or imagery**. These techniques can be used any place, any time and can actually physiologically alter our bodies. Keep in mind that these techniques may take practice before experiencing positive results. **Relaxation Breathing Practice:**
  1. Sit in a comfortable position (if you are unable to sit or close your eyes, this can still be done). Place your hands on your lap and your feet flat on the floor

2. Close your eyes, or if you are uncomfortable doing so, you can fix your eyes on a still object in front of you.
3. Take a deep breath in, and feel the air fill your lower abdomen (try not to lift your shoulders).
4. Hold the breath for a few seconds, and let it go slowly
5. Repeat this pattern, inhaling slowly, holding for a few seconds and exhaling slowly
6. As you exhale, imagine that you are blowing lightly on a candle, so that it does not blow out, but just flickers
7. Continue this pattern
8. Notice any parts of your body where there is tension- maybe your neck, feet, shoulders are tense. Mindfully relax those areas.
9. Continue this breathing for a few minutes.

### ❖ **Imagery**

*Follow steps 1-9 above and then:*

10. As you inhale, imagine a warm light- perhaps it is golden or orange, or any other color filling your body from the tip of your head slowly down to the bottom of your toes. Imagine this warm light is filled with peace, comfort, stillness. Imagine that it is allowing you to push out tension and worry.
  11. Continue your breathing, while sitting in stillness with this warm light.
  12. Pay attention to how you *feel* physically, emotionally
  13. When you are ready, you may open your eyes
- ❖ Sometimes, **having a good cry** is another way to cope with the stress of uncertainty. Letting out your emotions can feel like a release. It can be helpful to acknowledge one's helplessness in the face of overwhelming demands and uncertainty.
  - ❖ Many people may benefit from reading something **spiritual**, inspirational or meaningful to help distance oneself from the worries. This may include a favorite book, religious text, or other inspirational text. Participation in religious activity, if that is comforting is also a way to find support during uncertain times. Other spiritual resources can be found in your community.
  - ❖ **Positive self-talk** can be used to help remember the innate strength one has. This is in the same spirit as "the little engine that could." When we remind ourselves of our strength, it may help us to cope with the unknown. Some examples of positive self statements are:
    - I can make it through this.*
    - I am strong.*
    - I have been through hard times before and I survived.*
  - ❖ When we are experiencing uncertainty about something big, it may be useful to break it down and analyze **what areas are in our control**. For example, if a person is awaiting a call from a doctor about a serious medical test, she cannot make the test results arrive sooner, but she may be able to think about what to ask when the doctor calls. Being able to gain some knowledge in the situation may help her feel more in control of the situation.
  - ❖ Some people benefit from "staying busy" or finding small tasks to focus on. This can be helpful to distract oneself from the overwhelming amount of worry.

- ❖ Last, but certainly not least, depending upon the strength and **support of others** in uncertain times can be extremely valuable. Sometimes we have to admit that whatever we are coping with is too much for us to bear, and we must allow others to support us. Accepting offers of help can be difficult, but extremely valuable in times of distress.

## Find your own style

We can all recall times in our lives when we coped successfully and managed the stress of the unknown. It is important to look back at those times and recognize what worked to help us cope. Perhaps we can fall back on those methods, and add some new strategies, in order to *find our own style* of coping with uncertainty. Adaptation is important when under stress.

Here are some examples:

A young woman is struggling with the fear of job loss. She is concerned that she won't be able to afford her apartment if she loses her job. In the past, whenever she was overwhelmed with something, exercising or relaxation always worked. This time, it's not helping her deal with the stress. She feels the need to do something more pro-active, and decides to use a task-focused approach of keeping an eye on the job market. This activity eases her mind and helps her deal with the stress associated with the economy.

An elderly man has recently experienced the death of his wife of many years. He feels overwhelmed with the daily tasks of caring for the home without the support of his wife. And he's uncertain how he will cope with the upcoming holidays. Although he has not been a very social person, he recognizes the need for support from others and reaches out to some old friends. Depending on the help of others is a way to assist with the daily tasks and loneliness associated with the death of his wife.

If you find that your way of coping does not work, broaden it, or add something else to the mix! For more information on coping with stress and support in times of crisis, contact JBFCS at [www.jbfcs.org](http://www.jbfcs.org).

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