

Living With Not Knowing

PSYCHOEDUCATION · INTOLERANCE OF UNCERTAINTY

The thinking side of anxiety, and how to loosen its grip

Uncertainty is part of every life, but for some of us not knowing feels unbearable. **Intolerance of uncertainty** describes a tendency to find the unknown threatening, and to work hard to remove it. The trouble is that certainty-seeking brings short-term relief but tends to keep the discomfort going. This form helps you see the cycle, and practise stepping out of it.

Uncertainty is everywhere

Most things in life can't be known for sure in advance. That is part of being human, not a personal failing.

It fuels many worries

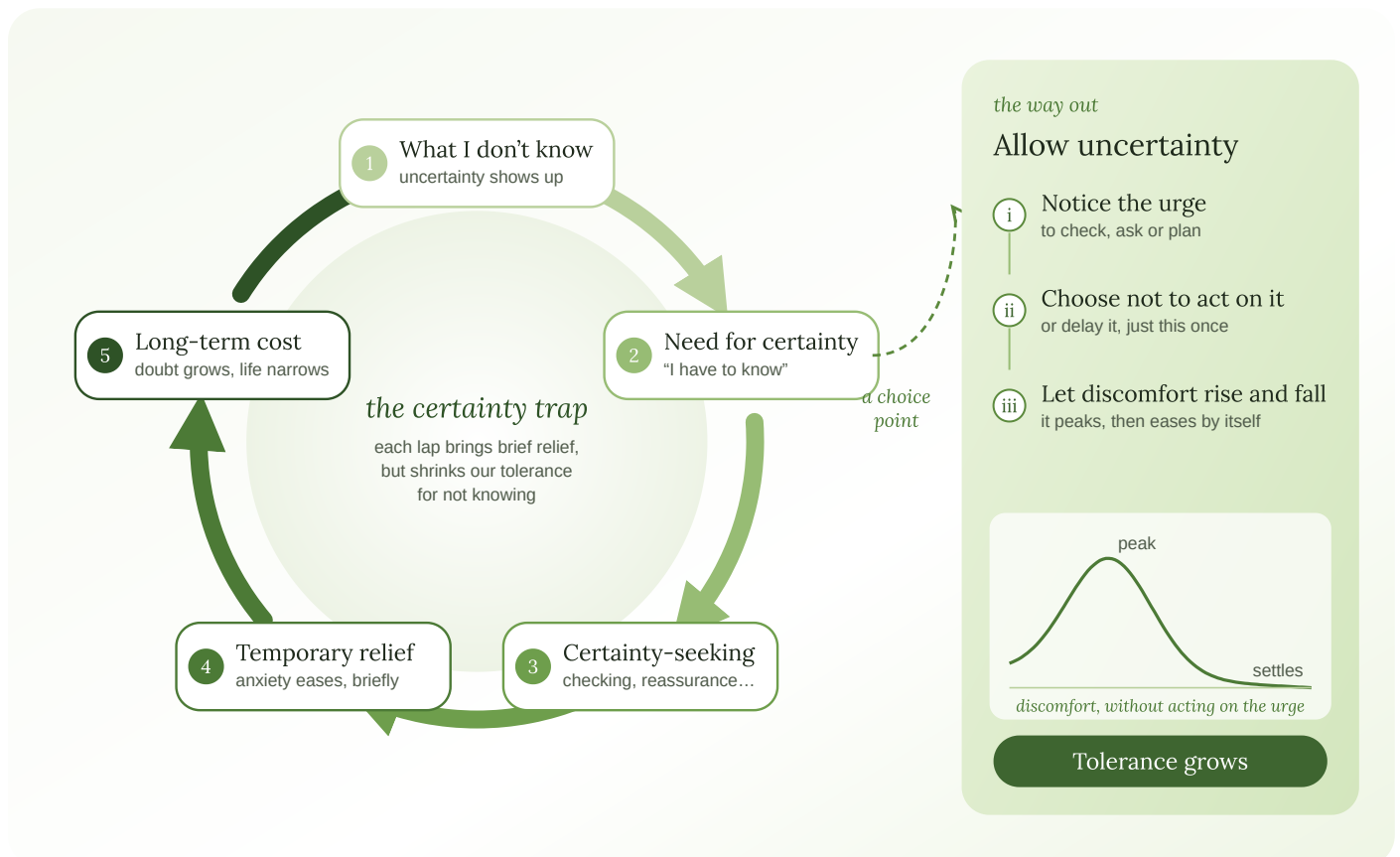
Research links intolerance of uncertainty with worry, and with many forms of anxiety and low mood.

Tolerance can grow

Like a muscle, it strengthens with practice, through small, repeated experiences of not knowing.

01 The certainty trap

and the way out



Why it sticks: certainty-seeking brings quick relief, so the mind learns to reach for it again. But because we never get to discover that we can cope with not knowing, doubt returns and the need for certainty grows.

02 How certainty-seeking shows up

common patterns

● Reassurance seeking

Asking others, again and again, whether it will be OK.

● Checking

Re-reading messages, checking locks, apps or news.

● Over-researching

Reading far more than needed before a decision.

● Over-planning

Mapping every detail and back-up plan in advance.

● Doing it all yourself

Struggling to delegate in case others get it wrong.

● Avoiding, putting off

Delaying decisions or new situations until sure.

● Mentally rehearsing

Replaying conversations or scripting what to say.

● Needing guarantees

Waiting for a definite yes before committing.

03 Tracing my cycle

one recent situation

1 What I don't know

the situation, and exactly what is uncertain

2 What my mind wants certainty about

what I feel I must know, and the "what if...?"

3 What I do to get certainty

tick any that apply, then describe

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ checking | ☐ reassurance |
| ☐ over-researching | ☐ over-planning |
| ☐ avoiding | ☐ putting things off |
| ☐ mentally rehearsing | ☐ doing it myself |

4 The temporary relief

how it felt straight afterwards, and for how long

5 The long-term cost

what it costs me: time, energy, confidence, relationships

6 Uncertainty I can practise allowing

one small, specific "not knowing" to sit with this week

04 Practising uncertainty

small experiments this week

Ideas to start small

Send a message without re-reading it

Order something new at a café

Let someone else choose the plan

Leave one thing unchecked

Make a small decision in under a minute

Go somewhere without looking it up first

Ask for reassurance once, not twice

Delegate a task and don't check it

THE UNCERTAINTY I ALLOWED	WHAT I PREDICTED	ANXIETY BEFORE	WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED	ANXIETY AFTER	WHAT I LEARNED
		0 — 10		0 — 10	
		0 — 10		0 — 10	
		0 — 10		0 — 10	

Worth remembering

Uncomfortable isn't the same as dangerous. Start small, let the urge to check rise and fall without acting on it, and notice that you can cope without knowing. Tolerance grows with practice, not with certainty.

GO AT YOUR OWN PACE

Letting go of certainty-seeking can feel uncomfortable at first; that usually eases with repetition. Choose steps that feel challenging but manageable, and repeat them before moving on. If anxiety feels overwhelming, consider talking it through with someone you trust or a qualified professional.

SOURCES

Buhr, K., & Dugas, M. J. (2002). The Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale: Psychometric properties of the English version. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 40(8), 931–945. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967\(01\)00092-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967(01)00092-4)

Carleton, R. N. (2016). Into the unknown: A review and synthesis of contemporary models involving uncertainty. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 39, 30–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2016.02.007>

Hebert, E. A., & Dugas, M. J. (2019). Behavioral experiments for intolerance of uncertainty: Challenging the unknown in the treatment of generalized anxiety disorder. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 26(2), 421–436. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.07.007>

Robichaud, M., Koerner, N., & Dugas, M. J. (2019). *Cognitive behavioral treatment for generalized anxiety disorder: From science to practice* (2nd ed.). Routledge.