

Intolerance of Uncertainty

RESEARCH FINDINGS

WHAT WAS THE AIM?

The aim of the paper was to synthesize the results of many studies to examine what is known about humans' normal responses to uncertainty.

WHAT DID SOME OF THE STUDIES SHOW?

We can measure a person's reaction to uncertainty by looking at two factors:

1. their need for predictability
2. the uncertainty arousal they feel in any situation

We also know that some people find:

- uncertainty to be upsetting and stressful
- believe uncertainty is negative and should be avoided
- feel that uncertainty leads to an inability to act

Since the 1960's experiments using [electric shocks](#) and unpleasant images revealed that uncertainty increases the human fear response. That is, when a negative event is uncertain there is more fear than if the same event is definitely going to occur. Studies have also shown that some people are better able to manage negative events in which there is uncertainty than others are. People that have more difficulty managing uncertainty are more likely to [worry](#) and demonstrate [higher blood pressure](#) in the waiting period before a negative event is predicted to occur.

While uncertainty makes negative events worse, it makes positive events more exciting. In one [experiment](#), female university students were told that attractive males had seen their profile and may or may not have liked them. A second group of female students were told that these attractive males had definitely liked them. The women who were not certain about having been liked were more attracted to the men than those certain about being liked.

Disliking uncertainty is associated with the [number of mental health issues](#) any individual may be experiencing with those that say that they dislike it immensely reporting more disorders occurring at the same time. Therefore it seems important to try to change this factor. Being afraid of uncertainty is also included in

eating disorders, [social anxiety](#), [anxiety disorders and depression](#).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE

People possess higher order and lower order goals. Lower order goals interact with the environment. Higher order goals are not always available to awareness. Psychological distress comes about as a result of unresolved conflict between goals. These goals can exist between different levels of the goal hierarchy. The [comparator system](#) is constantly on the lookout for areas in which our goals are being thwarted.

Being willing to reflect on these thwarted goals and on the different layers of goals allows us to adjust one goal to manage missing out on another. When we are open to our feelings and willing to understand them we find it easier to rearrange our goals and manage situations in which we are disappointed or in which our goals are threatened (in the case of uncertainty).

Being unwilling to reflect on the conflicts we are experiencing sets us up to be inflexible and experience ongoing psychological difficulties (making us susceptible to anxiety disorders, eating disorders and other emotional disorders).



Photo credit: Microsoft Office Clipart

As a result of the review, a model for how humans respond to uncertainty was developed. This model emphasized several important factors. They include the importance of the issue to the person, and the fact that when uncertainty arises there are two levels in which a person reacts. One relates to the specific fear they have in this situation, the other occurs directly as a result of the uncertainty experienced. It suggests that people that hope to control every aspect of their lives have more difficulties handling uncertain situations.

The model is applied to a range of difficulties including worries about illness, panic, social fears, eating concerns, compulsive behaviours. It is relevant to all sorts of life events including moving house, having a child or grandchild, changing schools, leaving work, becoming ill, making friends, everyday interactions (in fact the list is endless).

If you are interested in taking part in a short research project in this area – please email enoughworry@macquarie.edu.au

CITATION

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