



The Wellness Wire

Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine

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An initiative of the Faculty Assembly Steering Committee, the Office of Medical Student Support Services, the Fit & Well Committee, the Assistant Dean of Faculty Development, and the Division of Education and Faculty Development in the Department of Humanities, Health, and Society.

Greetings as we all learn to reframe our lives during these unprecedented times. Recognizing that figuring out our work and home lives during a pandemic can be challenging, the Faculty Assembly Steering Committee has launched this initiative to provide resources for faculty and staff to foster our collective well-being.

Editor: Greg Schneider, MD

To Be or Not To Be: Living with Uncertainty

Among the things that are so striking about Hamlet's famous "To Be or Not To Be" soliloquy is the weight of uncertainty in the Danish prince's life, mind, and words. Yes, the speech is about life, death, and madness, but to my mind, the most poignant aspect of his musings, and the play as a whole, lies in his doubt, uncertainty, and indecisiveness. Faced with a situation he does not fully understand, the burden of presumed leadership, and a wide range of possible actions with unknown outcomes, he remains paralyzed for most of the play. Given this last year, I think we can all identify with how paralyzing uncertainty can be, especially when our decisions could have life or death consequences.

Looked at from other perspectives, though, uncertainty can be oddly liberating. We may not know the answers to any of the questions plaguing us. When can I travel again? When will the pandemic be over? Will I have a reaction to the vaccine? Yet, we are still in control of our reactions

to the questions and our reactions to the feelings they engender in us. Yes, there are even strategies for handling uncertainty itself:

- a) Disengage from the situation. Sometimes, it helps just to withdraw from the acute uncertainty. It's OK not to know.
- b) Take slow and deep breaths. Breathe in like you are smelling a batch of cookies and breathe out like blowing out a candle.
- c) Take on small tasks that you can handle with certainty. Organize that drawer. Solve a little problem. It makes the bigger ones seem less frightening.
- d) Strive for clarity as opposed to certainty. The reality is that some things just are uncertain, but we can reflect on ourselves, on what we do and do not know, and what we value.
- e) Reach for connectedness. We are not alone. All of us are facing this uncertainty, and this pandemic, together. Remember to reach out.
- f) Be kind to yourself.

It is unfair to reduce Shakespeare's timeless tragedy to a list of psychological tips. The unknowns surrounding major decisions, life, death, and the afterlife are genuinely profound. How we grapple with those unknowns, nevertheless, is equally profound and an opportunity for us to grow and deepen our relationships with others. "Ignorance is bliss" does not have to be an insult. There may be wisdom and wonder in accepting aspects of what we do not know. Mystery, amidst a world in turmoil, may even breed joy.

Don't forget about our interactive [Wellness Wall](#).



Resources for Handling Uncertainty

Editor: Suzanne Minor, MD

We are certainly in the midst of uncertainty; we seem to be swimming in it. When I think about uncertainty, a few thoughts come to mind. First, I wasn't always good at handling the unknown and still have moments of terror around uncertainty when I want to reach for chocolate and run away from it! But with deliberate practice, I've significantly grown in this area. There's a skill here, and I can choose if I want to develop it. The best version of myself has learned to lean in and even revel in uncertainty! It really helps me to be grateful for and cherish the life I have. (Having said that, chocolate still has its place!)

I have learned that security and control are illusions. Life actually is uncertain all the time, even though we may not perceive it. I might become paralyzed in a car accident or be diagnosed with terminal cancer at any time. By embracing this idea of impermanence, I paradoxically can cherish the wonder, beauty and awe in my life. I'm reminded of the quote "Either everything is a miracle or nothing is." I like myself and my life better when I choose to believe everything is a miracle.

Uncertainty in medicine also comes to mind. By embracing and becoming comfortable with what I can control, I can embrace and let go of what I cannot control. For instance, I cannot control all aspects of structural racism, but I can control my mentorship of underrepresented students. Uncertainty abounds in clinical care. When I do not know what is going on with a patient's concern, I can still make sure to not miss red flags or serious known diagnoses. These encounters become opportunities to trust in my skills and a tincture of time and to let go of the rest.

I also have seen that patients with adverse childhood events or traumatic experiences in their lives may have a much more difficult time dealing with uncertainty as PTSD rears its head. The tips that follow include much of what I do with patients to help them with this process (in addition to appropriate referrals). Self-love, acceptance, and cultivating tolerance for being in the uneasiness of uncertainty are key.

Writing also comes to mind – there's often a period of time in the writing process when I'm grappling with concepts or how to frame those concepts. It's an uncomfortable time, and all I want to do is walk away. I've learned to sit with it, breathe through it,

and trust that I will move through this overwhelming moment. With continued effort or wrestling with concepts, I will arrive to the other side and the paper will often be better than I anticipated. The evidence is that I will work through it. I can rely on the evidence.

Here are some resources that can help you to further consider how to face, grapple with, and embrace uncertainty:

This article from [The Wellness Society](#) offers six tips for dealing with uncertainty. My favorite is to use self-compassion, to know that we are only human and have the right to our experience in that moment.

This [American Psychological Association article](#) offers 10 tips for dealing with uncertainty. Again, self-care abounds. I'm sensing a theme here...

This [Center for Creative Leadership article](#) offers 9 tips for dealing with uncertainty and anxiety. I love the tips of taking action through value-driven behaviors and writing in a gratitude journal. Just by writing down what I'm grateful for, I can see clearly what my values are and then consider how to take steps to act through these values.

This article from [The Help Guide](#) offers concrete options for learning to cope with uncertainty, including how to recognize and challenge your need for certainty.

This [NPR article](#) is my favorite. It digs deeper and could be called "Dealing with uncertainty, the advanced skills." Don't should on yourself and knowing when to shut it down really resonate! I think that often in medicine we think we can and should do it all and do it well, including uncertainty. It's ok and appropriate that we don't deal with something well!

This [Greater Good Magazine article](#) is also a favorite because it also includes next level skills (ok, I have two favorites!). I love the reframing of self-care as investing in yourself and finding meaning in the chaos. I plan on using the idea of stop looking for rescuers in providing patient care. How can I cultivate agency for patients, so that health care providers are not seen as rescuers?

Did we miss your favorite resource? Share it with us and we will include in the Faculty Development, DEICI and WIMS Newsletter.

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