Tolerating uncertainty

Why needing to be sure drives worry, and how to get used to not knowing.

Nobody likes not knowing. For some people, though, uncertainty feels almost like an allergy: even a small amount sets off a big reaction. Worry, checking and reassurance are all ways of trying to feel sure.

The trouble is that life cannot be made certain. However much you check or plan, another "what if" appears. What helps is building up your tolerance for not knowing.

Ways people try to get certainty

- [ ] Asking others for reassurance
- [ ] Checking and rechecking
- [ ] Making lists for everything
- [ ] Researching for hours before deciding
- [ ] Putting off decisions
- [ ] Doing everything myself, not delegating
- [ ] Avoiding anything new or unplanned
- [ ] Phoning or texting to check people are safe

What it costs

All of these work for a few minutes. Then doubt creeps back, and the behaviour has to be repeated. Over time your world gets smaller, decisions get harder, and your confidence in your own judgement drops.

Building tolerance

1. Choose one small certainty-seeking habit.
2. Drop it, on purpose, as an experiment. Send the email after one read. Order something new. Let someone else choose.
3. Notice what you predict will happen, and what does happen.
4. Notice that the discomfort rises, peaks and fades without you doing anything.
5. Repeat, and gradually take on bigger ones.

> **A phrase that helps**
> "Maybe, maybe not. I can live with not knowing."

Draws on the work of Michel Dugas and colleagues on intolerance of uncertainty.

My notes and questions

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Uncertainty experiments

Drop one certainty-seeking habit at a time and record what happens.

Name _____ Date _____

Pick habits you use to feel certain, and try doing without them. Start small.

What I did differently	What I feared would happen	What actually happened	If it went wrong, how did I cope?
Sent a work email after reading it once	*It would have a mistake and I would look careless*	*Nobody said anything*	*Not needed*

What am I learning about uncertainty, and about myself?

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