

# How to Find Hope Through Uncertainty

The effects of uncertainty experienced since the onset of the pandemic have touched all of our lives in different ways. For some the effects have been dramatic. For others, the impact has been more subtle, but felt nonetheless. Here are some practical strategies and approaches for managing the sometimes-overwhelming uncertainty.

## Don't resist

There's no doubt: We are living through challenging times. But resisting this current reality won't help us recover, learn, grow, or feel better. Ironically, resistance prolongs our pain and difficulty by amplifying the challenging emotions we are feeling. **There is real truth to the aphorism that what we resist persists.**

There's an alternative. Instead of resisting, we can practice acceptance. Research by Kristin Neff and her colleagues has shown that acceptance—particularly self-acceptance—is a counterintuitive secret to happiness. Acceptance is about meeting life where it is and moving forward from there.

Because acceptance allows us to see the reality of the situation in the present moment, it frees us up to move forward, rather than remaining paralyzed (or made ineffective) by uncertainty, fear, or argument. To practice acceptance, we surrender our resistance to a problematic situation, *and also to our emotions about the situation.*

See more below on the Dialectical Behavior Therapy strategy of *Radical Acceptance*.

## Search for your purpose

A natural reaction to an uncertain future is to freeze in place. If we don't know what's to come, how can we even think about moving forward? Yet

without a sense of direction and purpose, our physical and mental health, workplace effectiveness, and relationships can all suffer. We need to find a way to create our *own* direction, even when we don't know what's to come. A powerful answer on how to create direction during changing times comes from psychiatrist Viktor Frankl.

Frankl was developing a theory of human motivation when the Nazis annexed his home country of Austria. He spent years in concentration camps and lost his wife, brother, mother, and father to the Holocaust. He notes that we typically look for answers from "life" and, more specifically, from those around us: supervisors, politicians, and family and community leaders. We want to know what will be *brought to us* or *given to us* or *laid out before us* that will make us feel purposeful. Naturally, then, when things are uncertain and our leaders' messages become unclear or contradictory, we can feel adrift and purposeless.

When reflecting on his Holocaust experience Frankl wrote, **"It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly...Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual. These tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from person to person, and from moment to moment."**

Once we embrace this perspective, we can free ourselves of the need for being given moment to moment answers and can focus on labors of love that will have a lasting impact on ourselves and the people most central in our lives. And in that, Frankl argues, we find real purpose.

## Take time to breathe

“When you’re stressed or anxious, your breathing can get irregular, and shallow breath affects our autonomic nervous system (ANS), which can make us feel anxious and negative,” says Roseann Capanna-Hodge, an integrative and pediatric mental health expert in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

**Breathing deeply and intentionally calms down the nervous system, which tempers the stress response in the body that makes us feel anxious and unsettled.** Capanna-Hodge suggests trying the 4-7-8 breathing technique—simply breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds, and then exhale for 8 seconds. This rhythmic breathing is great for calming down your body and brain.

## Keep Up with Your Normal Tasks

**When things are in disarray, it can be easy to overlook the everyday routines you are already involved in. However, even when we can’t control some things, we can control how we spend our time.** It’s important to keep eating at your usual times, sleeping regularly, and doing the activities you are used to (when possible). By doing this, you may find yourself less stressed and feeling a sense of accomplishment. However, it’s also important to make time for fun, such as watching a favorite movie, engaging in a hobby, or sharing an activity with those in your household. Following a routine, or starting a new one, may help all of us ward off depression and anxiety during an uncertain time.

## Find *healthy* comfort items

One of the most important ways we can invest in ourselves is to comfort ourselves in healthy ways.

If we are to stay flexible, we need to feel safe and secure. When we feel uncertain or insecure, our brain tries to rescue us by activating our dopamine systems. This dopamine rush encourages us to seek rewards, making temptations more tempting. Think of this as your brain pushing you toward a comfort item...like an extra treat instead of a reasonable bedtime. Or the entire pan of brownies. Or an extra little something in your Amazon cart.

But **instead of turning to social media, junk food, or other unhealthy options to soothe our rattled nerves, we do better when we preemptively comfort ourselves in *healthy* ways.** Catch up with a friend, take time outside on a walk, hike or other adventure, exercise, reflect on what you are grateful for, listen to music, take a short nap, watch a funny video, show or movie, etc.

## Create an exercise routine

The benefits of physical activity and exercise have been demonstrated across the lifespan. We are meant to move and many of our body's systems work better when we are consistently physically active. **Sitting or lying down for extended periods, especially extended sitting in leisure time after required sitting related to work, is associated with poor physical health outcomes.** Just getting up every once in a while, every 10 minutes or so — just to go to the bathroom or pet your dog or make yourself a cup of tea — even though you're not spending a lot of energy, you're turning on your muscles.

For managing symptoms of depression, some research suggests that elevated levels of aerobic activity (exercise that significantly raises our heart rates) may be associated with greater reductions in depressive symptoms. **Consider engaging in physical activity once or twice daily** that includes brief periods (30-90 seconds) of greater intensity. For some, this might be

accomplished through exercise in their homes including jumping jacks, mountain climbers, and sequencing strength training exercises (i.e. standing squats, push-ups, sit-ups). For others, the use of home exercise equipment such as treadmills, elliptical machines, and stationary bikes may be helpful.

**Strength-training has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety for individuals with and without an anxiety disorder.** Weightlifting using exercise equipment or household items (textbooks, canned goods, milk jugs filled with water, paint cans) may help us to reduce the negative effects of stress and anxiety.

For children and adolescents, moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and exercise during the day are associated with **elevations in self-esteem, improved concentration, reductions in depressive symptoms, and improvements in sleep.**

**For older adults and individuals managing chronic medical conditions, regular walks are recommended.** The benefits of strength training and weightlifting (low weight with high numbers of repetitions) may be even greater in older adults to maintain quality of life and functioning.

## Find ways to laugh

There's some truth to the old adage that "laughter is the best medicine," says Dayry Hulkow, primary therapist at Arete Recovery, a Delphi Behavioral Health Group facility. **"Humor could help to relieve fear, rage, anger, anxiety, stress, and tension; it could alleviate symptoms of depression; reduce feelings of isolation; improve social competence; decrease negativity; and increase a sense of mastery,"** Hulkow says. This doesn't mean forget about what's going on and make jokes about it instead. Rather, take some time each day to do something that you know will make you laugh—watch your favorite sitcom or stand-up comedy routine, or schedule

some time to talk to your funniest friend. That brief reprieve, even if it's just for a few minutes, can really help lift your spirits.

## Prioritize sleep

“Anxiety and stress have a direct effect on sleep,” says Miller. “When you worry, it’s harder for your brain and your body to settle at night when it’s time to sleep. This is particularly true when you are worried about not sleeping or not getting enough sleep.” **If you aren’t sleeping well, chances are you’ll be more prone to feelings of stress and sadness. It can be a vicious cycle.** Miller suggests a few things to get more sleep. First, if you can’t sleep, don’t lie there trying to do it. “If you can’t sleep, get up and get out of bed. Find something quiet to do, like read or watch TV—though nothing too upsetting or stimulating. When you feel very sleepy again, get back in bed,” Miller suggests. You might have to do this a few times. Second, establish a sleep schedule. “It is important to keep your wake-up time consistent and understand that you may be tired in the short term, but this will build up sleep drive and eventually allow you to fall asleep faster at night,” says Miller. Last but not least, give yourself time to wind down and relax your mind before bed.

See the SHS self-care program [here](#).

## Don’t believe everything you think

Perhaps the most essential stress-reduction tactic that anyone has ever taught me is *not to believe everything I think*. In uncertain times, it’s particularly important not to believe thoughts that argue for the worst-case scenario.

**It *can* be helpful for us to consider worst-case scenarios so that we can weigh risks and actively prevent disaster. But when we *believe* these**

**stressful thoughts, we tend to react emotionally as though the worst case is *already happening* in real life, rather than just in our heads.** We grieve for things that we haven't actually lost, and react to events that are *not* actually happening. This makes us feel threatened, afraid, and unsafe when we are simply alone with our thoughts.

Our negativity bias can also set us up for failure. Expectations can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. When we expect the worst, we often feel too afraid or close-minded to seize opportunities or respond to challenges with creativity and grit.

Instead of buying into every stressful thought, we can actively imagine the best possible scenario. We can find silver linings to replace ruminations. This counters our natural tendency to overestimate risks and negative consequences.

## Stop looking for someone to rescue you

When we act as though we are powerless, we get trapped in narratives that leave us feeling angry, helpless, and trapped. And we start hoping other people will save us from our misery.

**Although it can feel good when others dote on us, most rescuers don't really help.** Our friends might want to save us—because helping others makes people feel good—and their intentions may be noble. But rescuers tend to be better enablers than saviors. If we stay stuck, they get to keep their role as our hero, or they get to distract themselves from their own problems.

**Rescuers tend to give us permission to avoid taking responsibility for our own lives.** On the other hand, emotionally supportive friends (or therapists) see us as capable of solving our own problems. They ask questions that help us focus on what we *do want* instead of what we don't.

## More on Accepting Reality:

It's difficult to accept what you don't want to be true. And it's more difficult to not accept. **Not accepting pain brings suffering.**

People often say, "I can't stand this," "This isn't fair," "This can't be true," and "It shouldn't be this way." It's almost as if we think refusing to accept the truth will keep it from being true, or that accepting means agreeing. Accepting doesn't mean agreeing.

It's exhausting to fight reality, and it doesn't work. Refusing to accept that you were fired for something you didn't do, that your friend cheated you, or that you weren't accepted into the college you wanted to attend doesn't change the situation, and it adds to the pain you experience.

Accepting reality is difficult when life is painful. No one wants to experience pain, disappointment, sadness, or loss. But those experiences are a part of life. When you attempt to avoid or resist those emotions, you add suffering to your pain. You may build the emotion bigger with your thoughts or create more misery by attempting to avoid the painful emotions. You can stop suffering by practicing acceptance.

Life is full of experiences, some that you enjoy and others you dislike. When you push away or attempt to avoid feelings of sadness and pain, you also diminish your ability to feel joy. Avoidance of emotions often leads to [depression](#) and [anxiety](#). Avoidance can also lead to destructive behaviors, such as gambling, drinking too much, overspending, eating too little or too much, and overworking. These behaviors may help avoid pain in the short run, but they only make the situation worse in the long run.

Acceptance means that you can turn your resistant ruminating into accepting thoughts like, "I'm in this situation. I don't approve of it. I don't think it's OK, and I can't change that it happened."



Imagine that you are late for an important job interview. Traffic is especially congested, and you are stopped at red light after red light. Raging at the traffic lights or the drivers in front of you will not help you get to your destination sooner and will only add to your upset. Accepting the situation and doing the best you can be less emotionally painful, and likely more effective. With acceptance you will arrive at your interview less distressed and perhaps better able to manage the situation.

## Radical Acceptance Requires Practice

Radical acceptance is a skill that requires practice. The ability to accept that traffic is heavy, that it's raining on the day you wanted to go to the beach, and that your friend cancels when you had plans to spend the day together is important for coping well and living a more contented life. When you practice acceptance, you are still disappointed, sad, and perhaps fearful in such situations, but you don't add the pain of non-acceptance to those emotions and make things worse. Practicing acceptance in these situations also helps you prepare for more difficult circumstances.

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[SHS Mental Health Resources](#)