

Worksheet

US English

Uncertainty Beliefs – Experiment Record



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Description

Intolerance of uncertainty (IU) is a disposition – or character trait – which develops from one's beliefs about uncertainty and its consequences (Dugas & Robichaud, 2007). Some people have a positive attitude towards uncertainty (e.g. “It's boring to always know what's going to happen”, “I like to trust my intuition and go with the flow”) whereas people who have high IU tend to have more negative beliefs about uncertainty (e.g. “It's unbearable not knowing”, “Uncertainty ruins everything”) and may find it hard to tolerate even a small amount of uncertainty.

Intolerance of uncertainty has long been part of cognitive models of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD: e.g. Dugas, Gagnon, Ladouceur, Freeston, 1998) and there is a strong relationship between IU and GAD (e.g. Donegan et al, 2010; Dugas & Ladouceur, 2000). It is also increasingly recognized as a transdiagnostic risk factor for many clinical conditions, including anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and eating disorders (Carleton et al, 2012; Toffolo et al, 2014; Renjan et al, 2016).

In 2018, Hebert & Dugas published an updated model of GAD which clarified the relationships between the state of uncertainty, beliefs about uncertainty, and anxiety, which gave more prominence to clients' appraisals. The model proposes that situations which are uncertain, novel, or ambiguous trigger a state of uncertainty. Individuals with dispositionally high IU appraise the uncertainty in catastrophically negative ways which then lead to emotional, cognitive, and behavioral sequelae. The model suggests that two categories of beliefs about uncertainty are clinically important:

- Beliefs that uncertainty has negative implications for oneself and one's behavior.
- Beliefs that uncertainty is unfair and spoils everything.

Clinically, the intention of the updated model is for therapists to help their clients address their appraisals of uncertainty directly by using behavioral experiments. Hebert & Dugas suggest that although the practical result of this approach may appear superficially similar to earlier exposure-to-uncertainty treatments for GAD, it reduces clinical time spent focusing on the specific content of worries, may be more effective than situational exposure, and may encourage patients to identify and modify unhelpful safety behaviors.

The *Uncertainty Beliefs – Experiment Record* is a worksheet designed to help clients and therapists design and conduct behavioral experiments that target beliefs about uncertainty. Although it targets client appraisals of uncertainty, the format of this worksheet differs from the treatment approach referenced in Hebert & Dugas (2019).

Instructions

“People sometimes react strongly to uncertainty because of what they believe about it. While some people are OK with uncertainty and ‘not knowing’, for other people it is almost as though they are allergic to uncertainty – even a small amount can cause a powerful reaction. People who are ‘allergic to uncertainty’ often spend a lot of time trying to avoid it, either by worrying about what might happen, or by thinking of coping strategies for uncertain situations they can’t avoid. Can you relate to this? The problem is that these ‘solutions’ to uncertainty come with their own costs. This exercise is designed to help you to explore some of your beliefs about uncertainty – would you be willing to do that with me?”

- 1. Uncertainty beliefs.** Explore the client’s beliefs about uncertainty. Hebert & Dugas recommend that clients can be encouraged to complete the Intolerance of uncertainty scale (IUS) and to use self-monitoring to understand more about situations and triggers for their anxiety and worry. The clinical aim at this step is to identify one of the client’s beliefs about uncertainty, and to rate how strongly they believe it.
 - What is it about uncertainty that bothers you?
 - Why is uncertainty so bad?
 - Could we read some of these items from the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale and see which ones resonate for you?
- 2. Situation & feelings.** Help the client to describe an uncertain situation that triggers their uncertainty belief. Encourage them to describe how the uncertainty makes them feel, both emotionally and physiologically. Categorize what makes the situation uncertain: is it a novel situation for them, or is there some kind of ambiguity?
 - Tell me about a situation in your life that triggers this belief about uncertainty.
 - Can you tell me about a recent situation where you felt that way about uncertainty?
 - What do you feel emotionally in a situation like that?

- What do you feel in your body when you are in that situation?
3. **Coping responses.** Help the client to describe how they normally cope when confronted with uncertain situations like they have described. Explore what safety behaviors they use to cope with the uncertainty. Consider safety behaviors including: avoidance, checking, information gathering, planning, procrastination, reassurance seeking, worrying.
- What would you normally do if you were faced with an uncertain situation like this, and you couldn't avoid it?
 - In this situation, is there anything you would do to feel more certain?
4. **Experiment.** Help the client to devise a behavioral experiment that would create a state of uncertainty, which they could use to test their uncertainty belief.
- **What type of experiment would best test the belief?** For example, it could be a direct hypothesis testing experiment, a survey, or an observational experiment.
 - **Can the experiment be conducted in the therapy office, or outside?** Quick in-office experiments can help to generate momentum for more substantial out-of-office experiments.
 - **Where** will the experiment be conducted, **when** will it take place, **how** will it be conducted (consider what data will need to be recorded: their own thoughts, feelings, body sensations and behavior; as well as the behavior of others ; the environment), and **who** will need to be present?
 - **Consider safety, client readiness, and additional practicalities.**
 - **Prepare for problems.** Helpful questions include “What problems might arise?” and “How would you deal with that?”
5. **Outcome and learning.** Take time to understand the meaning of the experiment and the data. What sense has the client made of it? What do they believe the result says about them or other people? Encourage reflection on what has been achieved, and what has been learned.
- What happened?
 - What did you learn?
 - How much do you believe the original uncertainty belief now?
 - How does the outcome of the experiment affect the belief you identified?

- What does the result say about your previous belief?
- Is there a new belief that better captures how you feel about uncertainty now? How strongly do you believe that new belief?
- How could the results of this experiment affect your daily life now?

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Uncertainty Beliefs – Experiment Record

Uncertainty Beliefs What is your belief about uncertainty?	Situation & feelings Describe an uncertain situation that triggers this belief for you. How does the uncertainty make you feel?	Coping responses If you couldn't avoid this situation, what would you do to cope with it?	Experiment How could you create a state of uncertainty to test your uncertainty belief?	Outcome & learning What happened? What is your belief about uncertainty now?
<p>• What bothers you about uncertainty?</p> <p>• Rate how strongly you hold that belief about uncertainty (0-100%)</p>	<p>• Is this event: novel, ambiguous, or unpredictable?</p>	<p>• Consider: avoidance, checking, gathering information, procrastination, planning, seeking reassurance, worrying.</p>	<p>• How, where, and when will you test it?</p> <p>• Which safety behaviors will you need to drop to make it a fair test?</p> <p>• What data will you need to record?</p>	<p>• Rate how strongly you hold your belief about uncertainty now (0-100%)</p>

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Uncertainty Beliefs What is your belief about uncertainty?	Situation & feelings Describe an uncertain situation that triggers this belief for you. How does the uncertainty make you feel?	Coping responses If you couldn't avoid this situation, what would you do to cope with it?	Experiment How could you create a state of uncertainty to test your uncertainty belief?	Outcome & learning What happened? What is your belief about uncertainty now?
<p>Uncertainty means I won't be able to enjoy myself (90%).</p> <p>Not knowing feels unbearable (80%).</p> <p>• What bothers you about uncertainty? • Rate how strongly you hold that belief about uncertainty (0-100%)</p>	<p>I'm supposed to go to a wedding in a few weeks and I won't know anyone there (unpredictable). Not knowing anyone is stressful.</p> <p>my partner wants us to go on holiday together to somewhere abroad that I've never been to before (novel). I find it stressful even talking to her about it.</p> <p>• Is this event: novel, ambiguous, or unpredictable?</p>	<p>Worry about what might happen, where I'll sit, and who I'll have to speak to.</p> <p>Plan excuses to leave early.</p> <p>Try and find out from the bride who I'll be sitting with and what time things will happen.</p> <p>make excuses not to go. If I really have to go somewhere new then I'll normally do lots of research and watch YouTube videos to see what it's like.</p> <p>• Consider: avoidance, checking, gathering information, procrastination, planning, seeking reassurance, worrying.</p>	<p>Go to the wedding with an attitude of "everyone's nice and it doesn't matter who I speak to".</p> <p>Plan to stay until the end of the night, so I can embrace whatever uncertainty comes up.</p> <p>Have a go at talking to people and getting to know them.</p> <p>Practice by going on day trips to some places I don't know, and see how that feels.</p> <p>Ask my partner not to tell me where we're going for the day, and I'm going to embrace it as a surprise.</p> <p>• How, where, and when will you test it? • Which safety behaviors will you need to drop to make it a fair test? • What data will you need to record?</p>	<p>There were parts of the night when I felt a bit uncomfortable, but I got speaking to some nice people and I really enjoyed getting to know some of the bride's old friends.</p> <p>New belief: I still don't like uncertainty, but it doesn't mean that I can't enjoy myself (90%).</p> <p>We went for a walk in the woods in a national park. I didn't like the not knowing and it was frustrating that I wasn't wearing the right shoes and clothes. We still enjoyed the walk and stopped for lunch in a nice spot.</p> <p>Belief: Not knowing is unbearable (60%).</p> <p>• Rate how strongly you hold your belief about uncertainty now (0-100%)</p>

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