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# How to Deal with Uncertainty

*Note to Readers: This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley also does a blog called "Meandering to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her musings on life, death, and how to wash a cat.*

Last week, I received a monthly email promotion for a magazine called "Chief Learning Officer." It's aimed at business executives who hire me to give communications training. Anyway, the blurb I received on my computer in my home office noted that the upcoming issue was going to help readers survive and thrive in 2010. My heart went pitter patter, patter pitter, then pitter patter again. At last, I was going to read the news I have been hoping for since September 2008: Good times are here again. But then I clicked further to find one of the issue's key articles. The headline was: "Leading Through Uncertainty." I was crushed.

If I were to make a list of all the things I hate in life, it would be headed by uncertainty. I have zip interest in learning how to lead through it, jump over it, get reconciled to it, succeed despite it, or forge an alliance with it. I just want uncertainty to go away. That's it. Go away, like right this second.

As impossible as my desire for certainty is, I'm not alone in clinging to it. According to Daniel Gilbert, a psychology professor at Harvard University, uncertain fears make human beings feel far worse than certain problems. Writing recently in the New York Times, Gilbert said: "People feel worse when something bad might occur than when something bad will occur. Most of us aren't losing sleep and sucking down Marlboros because the Dow is going to fall 1,000 points, but because we don't know whether it will fall or not. Human beings find uncertainty more painful than the things they're certain about."

Gilbert, author of the book "Stumbling on Happiness," cites several studies affirming his hypothesis, including one in which patients with permanent colostomies felt more positive than those hoping theirs might be temporary. "Why would we prefer to know the worst than to suspect it," Gilbert continues. "Because when we get bad news, we weep for a while, and then get busy making the best of it. We change our behavior, we change our attitudes. We raise our consciousness and lower our standards. We find our bootstraps and tug. But we can't come to terms with circumstances we don't yet know. An uncertain future leaves us stranded in an unhappy present with nothing to do but wait."



In this era of cross-cultural studies, global experts have noticed that different nationalities have developed unique ways of dealing with life's upsets. Germans, who rank high on an uncertainty avoidance scale developed by a Dutchman named Geert Hofstede, try to handle it with rules and regulations. Swedes, on the other hand, have a more laid back view of life's mysteries. The Irish, among whom I count my ancestors, score in the middle of the uncertainty avoidance pack. This research leads me to believe that my real parents were a neat, well-mannered Düsseldorf couple who gave me up for adoption to a Dublin family rather than deal with a messy, colicky, poopy, screaming, sleepless baby, namely me. Come to think of it, what a good idea.

Despite my lifelong belief that uncertainty sucks, I am painfully aware that I must adjust to the unpleasant reality. As a long-time self-employed person, I've had to cope for almost 20 years with a continual lack of job security. Yeah, yeah, yeah, by now, you'd think I'd be better at it. But feelings aren't facts. Although I openly despise not knowing where my next check is coming from, I have developed practical strategies to march forward despite my angst. Some tips for all of you bouncing off the walls with today's seemingly endless economic roller coaster:

**Rant and rave.** I think there's nothing wrong with objecting to the inevitable. You should see me carry on about death. Suffice it to say, I already have a plan not to go there. At what seems to be the end of my life, I intend to handcuff myself to the hospital bed so no one can take me.

**Develop rituals.** So you can't control macroscopic factors such as the global economy. I suggest you can set up predictable behaviors in your own life. I find that the certainty of drinking my morning coffee before I get dressed or turn on my computer each morning helps ground me.

**Follow a schedule.** Much like rituals, adhering to patterns such as eating every Friday night at the same restaurant can steady your frayed nerves. Getting up and going to bed at the same times – no matter how dull – is another way of lowering your uncertainty-despising blood pressure.

**Redefine uncertainty.** Instead of viewing the unknown as frightening, reframe it as a fun adventure. If you knew, for example, exactly what would happen at the dinner at your boss's home, there would be no point in going.

**Act, don't react.** If you still have money in investments, you need to keep your wits about you. Refuse to fall into a common mistake of withdrawing funds at the first sign of volatility. If there's any area of life where you'll profit from having a calm, long-range view, it's the stock market.



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**Avoid the worst blunder.** In my demented younger years, I had so few emotional skills that I often created a bad outcome just to settle an issue. An example was leaving several perfectly good jobs because I couldn't stand wondering whether or not I would advance up the ladder of success. I see similar patterns all the time in the work place.

**Develop a higher purpose.** Jobs, money, property, even loved ones come and go throughout life. Necessary losses are beyond your control. But you can learn to redirect your energies by throwing yourself into activities such as teaching English to immigrants or providing meals for the homeless. In a world that sometimes seems to be spinning out of control, people needing your help continue to be an enduring and relentless certainty.

*Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at [KBegley@writecompanyplus.com](mailto:KBegley@writecompanyplus.com). She responds to everybody.*