

Information handout

US English

Intolerance Of Uncertainty

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Intolerance Of Uncertainty

Description

Intolerance of uncertainty can be viewed as a dispositional characteristic that results from a set of negative beliefs about uncertainty and its implications.

Dugas & Robichaud (2007)

Intolerance of uncertainty involves the tendency to react negatively on an emotional, cognitive, and behavioral level to uncertain situations and events.

Dugas, Buhr, & Ladouceur (2004)

Uncertainty is a normal part of life – we can never be 100% sure about what will happen next. Many people feel good about uncertainty and live lives where they seek excitement: they often score highly on personality measures of ‘openness to experience’. Other people find uncertainty aversive, stressful, or distressing, and don’t function as well in uncertain situations. They might hold negative beliefs about uncertainty and may try to avoid it, or use strategies to try to control or eliminate it. Psychologists label these reactions as ‘intolerance of uncertainty’. Commonly-used metaphors are that people who are intolerant of uncertainty behave as though they have a phobia of uncertainty, or as though they are ‘allergic to uncertainty’.

Intolerance of uncertainty (IU) was first described in individuals suffering from Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). Many behaviors associated with GAD, such as worry and avoidance, can be framed as attempts to increase one’s sense of certainty: worry is the attempt to look ahead and foresee potentially negative consequences, avoidance and ‘sticking to what is known and safe’ reduces exposure to the unknown. More recent research has recognised intolerance of uncertainty 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).

The *Intolerance Of Uncertainty* information handout describes IU in the context of worry, and outlines some of the unhelpful strategies that people high in IU tend to use to control how they feel. One important aspect of treatment for GAD is the effort to increase client’s willingness to tolerate uncertainty, sometimes framed as the challenge of ‘embracing uncertainty’.

Instructions

This is a Psychology Tools information handout. Suggested uses include:

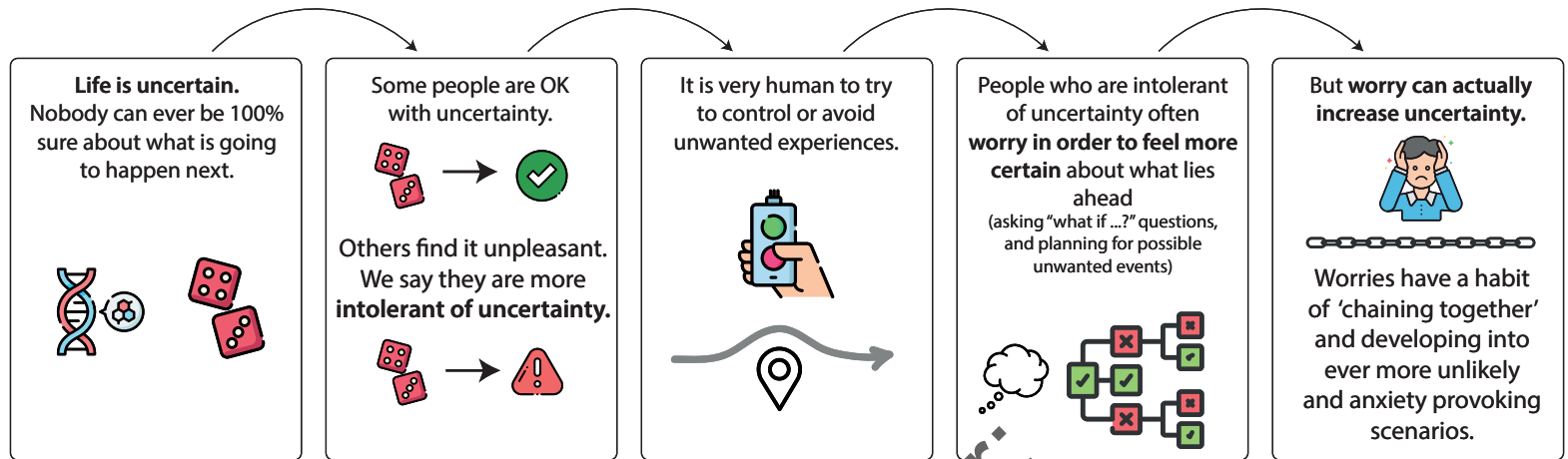
- Client handout – a psychoeducation resource.
- Discussion point – to provoke a discussion and explore your client's beliefs.
- Therapist learning tool – to improve your familiarity with a psychological construct.
- Supervision tool – to develop formulations and knowledge.
- Teaching resource – a learning tool during training.

References

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- Toffolo, M. B., van den Hout, M. A., Engelhard, I. M., Hoge, J. T., Cath, D. C. (2014). Uncertainty, checking, and intolerance of uncertainty in subclinical obsessive compulsive disorder: an extended replication. *Journal of Obsessive Compulsive and Related Disorders*, 3(4), 338–44.
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Intolerance of Uncertainty

One popular psychological theory about why people worry a lot concerns **uncertainty**. It goes like this:



Problematic strategies for managing uncertainty:

Avoiding new situations and sticking to your habits or routines

Intended consequences

- To feel comfortable and safe.

Unintended consequences

- You feel less confident (less able to do new things).
- Less 'practice' means more anxiety in new situations.
- You miss out on things that could have been fun.

so you avoid even more

Worrying and 'thinking ahead'

Intended consequences

- To be prepared for every possibility.
- To prevent bad outcomes.

Unintended consequences

- Worries can 'chain together' and branch off into unlikely possibilities about things that might never happen.
- Thinking about bad outcomes leads to more anxiety.

so you worry even more



More helpful strategies for managing uncertainty:

Accept that uncertainty is part of life. Once you have accepted that something is present you no longer need to fight it. You can even start to be curious about it.

Embrace uncertainty. Psychologists think that it can be helpful to face your fears and embrace uncertainty in order to learn that you can cope. You might even find that you enjoy it!

Rethink your attitude to uncertainty. What life would be like if there was no uncertainty? How would it feel if you knew *exactly* what was going to happen at every moment, if there were no surprises? How would it feel to watch a movie or read a book if you already knew the ending?

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