Write down...

One thing in your work where you don't know what the right course of action is, and waiting for it to become clear isn't working.

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Beyond coping: developing leaders' capacity to regulate and navigate uncertainty.



APS IOP Conference 2026

Sean Connaughton and Kath McCarthy

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Look at your card.

How are you responding to that situation, and how does that compare with what was going on for you in the last 20 mins?

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This session has three objectives about leading through uncertainty.

1

Recognise the role uncertainty plays in leadership effectiveness

2

Apply a framework to regulate uncertainty in context

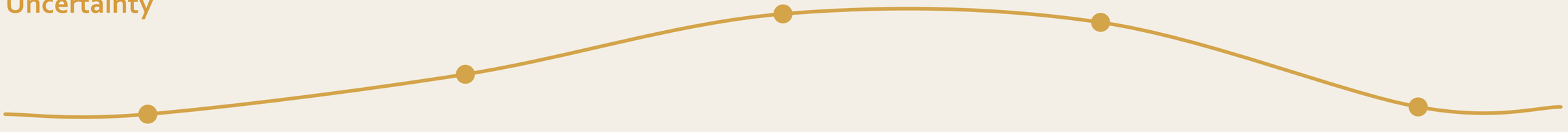
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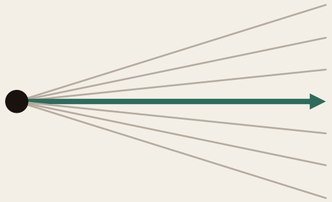
Develop a structured, evidence-based method to build tolerance for uncertainty

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When things seem unclear, competing possibilities can flood us, creating an internal tension that activates us.

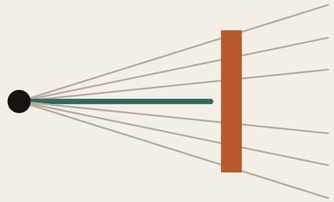
Uncertainty





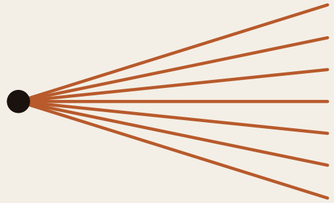
We have a plan

Explicitly (e.g., goals) or implicitly (e.g., beliefs and assumptions), a plan narrows what we notice and do.



Something unexpected happens

An obstacle, a surprise or a clashing goal can break the plan.



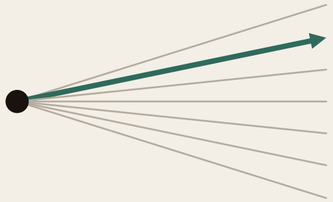
Possibilities compete

The plan is no longer our focus and many other options vie for attention.



It activates us, which shapes behaviour

At a point, the overwhelm of possibilities can tip into anxiety, creativity or excitement, shaping behaviour for better or worse.



A new frame emerges

We explore until a new plan dominates, which can reduce uncertainty.

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Based on Hirsh, J. B., Mar, R. A., & Peterson, J. B. (2012). Psychological entropy: A framework for understanding uncertainty-related anxiety. Psychological Review, 119(2), 304–320.

Hirsh and colleagues propose four tenets to explain how we experience uncertainty, which we've adapted.

1 Uncertainty can pose a critical challenge to our survivability, so we may be motivated to keep it at a manageable level.

2 Uncertainty is more likely when we perceive many options, perspectives and decisions within a situation.

3 Adopting clear goals and beliefs can allow us to comfortably ignore most of the uncertainty we could experience.

4 Anxiety, or its absence, can give us cues to how we are responding to uncertainty in a given moment.

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Adapted from Hirsh, J. B., Mar, R. A., & Peterson, J. B. (2012). Psychological entropy: A framework for understanding uncertainty-related anxiety. Psychological Review, 119(2), 304–320.

We often have more influence over the uncertainty that we generate ourselves.

- Exogenous uncertainty comes from the world around us.
- Endogenous uncertainty is our perception of what is going on, often based on goals, beliefs, competing commitments and undecided action.
- How much influence we have to address uncertainty depends on the uncertainty around us and how we process it.



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Adapted from Griffin, M. A., & Grote, G. (2020). When is more uncertainty better? A model of uncertainty regulation and effectiveness. *Academy of Management Review*, *45*(4), 745–765.

If uncertainty is a given and leaders need to work with it, what does that mean for our work as practitioners?

1

How do you work with leaders to navigate uncertainty?

2

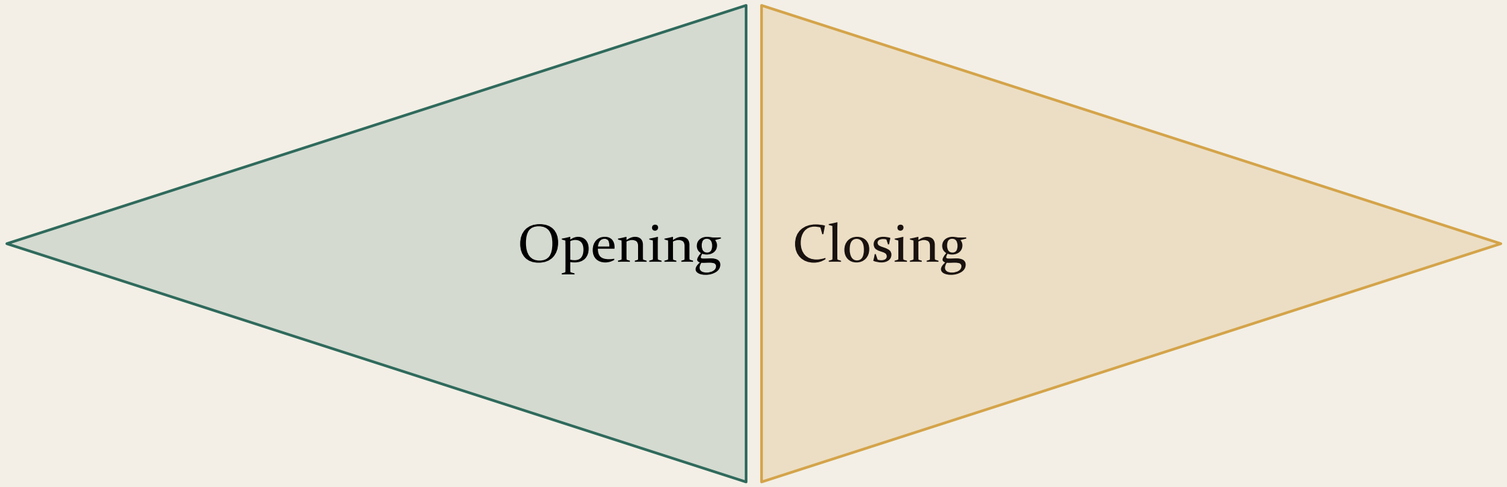
What is our role as psychologists in this?

3

What makes it hard?

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Neither opening nor closing is better. It depends on you, the situation, and your place in it.



Exploring, questioning, generating options, staying in the uncertainty longer.

Converging, committing, deciding, acting.

How might the situation shape it?

- What is this situation asking for: speed, experimentation, expertise, growth, etc?
- As a leader, are you opening or closing, and is that what your team needs?
- As a practitioner, are you opening or closing for the leader, and whose need does that serve?

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Adapted from Griffin, M. A., & Grote, G. (2020). When is more uncertainty better? A model of uncertainty regulation and effectiveness. *Academy of Management Review, 45*(4), 745–765.

Tolerance for uncertainty can be built, but exposure alone may not be enough.

- Progress often requires us to step into uncertainty
- Safety behaviours can get in the way
- We don’t have to do it alone

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For example, see Cole, R., Pearce, E., Kenny, S., & Hildreth, A. F. (2026). Strategies for teaching uncertainty tolerance in medical education: A qualitative study. *JACEP Open*, *7*(1), 100298; Felsman, P., Gunawardena, S., & Seifert, C. M. (2020). Improv experience promotes divergent thinking, uncertainty tolerance, and affective well-being. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, *35*, 100632.

Design one small experiment to step into uncertainty.

One method to try

1. Notice the uncertain situations that preoccupy you most and what you tend to do in response.
2. Identify a situation where that response is holding you back.
3. For that situation, design one small experiment where you do something different: what, when, with whom.
4. Write down what you predict will happen.
5. Afterwards, compare with your prediction and adjust (e.g., make it easier or harder).

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Adapted from Hebert, E. A., & Dugas, M. J. (2019). Behavioral experiments for intolerance of uncertainty: Challenging the unknown in the treatment of generalized anxiety disorder. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 26*(2), 421–436.

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5. Afterwards, compare with your prediction and adjust (e.g., make it easier or harder).

Practice it

In pairs, work through steps 1 – 4. Use the situation on your card if you want.

~5 mins then swap.

When your partner is sharing

- Help them find an experiment small enough to do by a date they can name.
- Draw on what has worked for you or your clients.
- Go only as far as your partner wants to.

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Adapted from Hebert, E. A., & Dugas, M. J. (2019). Behavioral experiments for intolerance of uncertainty: Challenging the unknown in the treatment of generalized anxiety disorder. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 26*(2), 421–436.

1 Uncertainty can narrow our perception and pull us towards certainty. Certainty matters, but our bias for it can lead us to reach for it it prematurely.

2 Before responding to uncertainty, ask what the situation requires of you.

3 Tolerance for uncertainty helps us respond to uncertainty based on what the situation requires, rather than what feels comfortable or familiar.

4 You can build tolerance through small experiments that expose you to uncertainty, including by working with those who see things differently.

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