

Top tips for parents for **managing uncertainty** with their children

How we as humans deal with uncertainty:

Humans find uncertainty very difficult to deal with. In fact, a recent study has shown that people find bad news easier than uncertainty. This study looked into the mental health of people who were told they might have Huntington's disease. This is a genetic disease and so all participants were aware that they might have the disease due to knowledge of family members already diagnosed with it. The study focused on the well-being of the participants as they were going through the process of testing to see if they had the Huntington's gene present. Those that were told that they didn't have the Huntington's gene experienced an increase in their mental health and well-being (as expected). Interestingly, those that were told that they had the gene present and would get Huntington's also saw an increase in their mental health. However, those that were told that the tests had come up inconclusive and were uncertain as to whether the gene was present or not suffered a decrease in their mental health and well-being. This goes to show how much of a negative effect uncertainty can have on us.

Why do we have uncertainty?

Uncertainty isn't actually a negative thing and is important in keeping us safe in situations where we might be in danger. For example, if we were walking through an African nature reserve and heard something rustling in the bushes, the uncertainty of whether it was just the wind or a lion or animal which could pose as a threat to us would make our heart race, our blood pump faster and our muscles get ready to escape quickly if we needed to. This fight or flight mode puts us into extra alert so that we are able to move quickly, to run and escape the dangerous situation. This is a good system to keep us alert until we are out of danger and are safe. In more everyday scenarios, our body's uncertainty of how pain might be caused from touching something that's come out of the oven and not knowing how hot it is, encourages us to use oven gloves to prevent harm to ourselves. Therefore, uncertainty is important in keeping us safe, keeping us from harm and helping us to make sensible decisions.

Uncertainty only causes problems when we are left with this feeling for extended periods of time. Hypervigilance is great in the moment but it's when we stay in that for prolonged periods that all the heart racing and blood pumping can lead to stress on the body, exhaustion and low mood.

How to manage uncertainty:

When managing uncertainty, it is often the case that we cannot remove the uncertainty completely. For example, with all the uncertainty around Covid-19, we can't remove the virus so need to find ways to manage this uncertainty and the impact of it. Instead of trying to change the situation and remove the uncertainty, we can focus on reducing the stress and hypervigilance.

When there is a lot of uncertainty in our lives, we often slip into behavioural patterns that appear comforting in the moment but can have a negative long-term impact. These comforting behaviours can include diet, loss of daily routine or loss of structure in exercise.

Tips for parents in helping their children to manage uncertainty:

- 1. Help encourage your children to accept the situation** - It is often helpful to talk about the situation that is causing your child uncertainty and to discuss that although the situation isn't what they like, it isn't something that can be changed and that they will be able to adapt and be ok. It can also be useful to acknowledge that the situation is unlikely to last forever and to acknowledge that they are not the only person going through it. For example, if your child is finding the uncertainty due to Covid-19 difficult, it might be good to remind them that everyone is going through it and finding it challenging (even though everyone might not express it and seem this way). It is also important to accept the reality of the emotional response that uncertainty can cause. It is good for children to know that although there is much uncertainty and there is nothing they can do to change that, it is normal for this to cause an emotional response (e.g. sadness, anger, frustration) and whatever they are feeling is ok.
- 2. Help your child not to spend too much time ruminating on uncertainty** - Although it is good to accept your emotions, wallowing in them makes you go round and round without coming to a solution or moving forwards. It is important that we are careful not to let these emotions take control as this can often lead to 'what if' scenarios and catastrophizing. If we are too busy focusing on all the negative emotions, we often miss out on the opportunities to make the situation better. By encouraging your child to accept this but not to spend too much time dwelling on it, they are more likely to be able to move forwards and focus on the positives. Perhaps try to encourage designating some specific 'worry time' into the day (e.g. 10 minutes), and confine any rumination to this time rather than allowing it to last indefinitely.
- 3. Help your children to look at where they do have areas of control** – To help manage feelings of uncertainty or feelings of being stuck, we can look at areas that we do have certainty and have some control over. Usually we have most control in how we run our day to day lives. Therefore, encouraging your child to maintain a basic day to day structure by getting up on time, getting good sleep, eating well, having regular contact with friends and peers can be important in helping them to feel that they have some control over their lives during times of uncertainty. You can also support your children in emphasising the control they have in areas they are worried about to help reduce this worry and uncertainty. For example, if your child is going to university and is feeling worried about the uncertainty of making friends and meeting people, you can help them look into clubs/societies that are available to join, or look into online forums for that university and see if they run sessions where you can meet people on your course before you join. By helping your children make a plan, rather than leaving things to chance, they will feel that they have more control and there should be less uncertainty.

If you would like more information on how parents can help manage uncertainty in children and young people through the Covid-19 pandemic this link provides some good advice and information:

<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Managing%20Uncertainty%20in%20children%20and%20young%20people%20-%20advice%20for%20parents%20during%20Covid-19.pdf>