



**LIVING IN  
UNCERTAIN  
TIMES**



# Living in Uncertain Times

## Our brains hate uncertainty.

They are constantly working to reduce it and to create certainty.

In today's environment, that means we want the answers to questions that no-one can reliably give us.

*When will this pandemic be over?*

*Am I and my family safe?*

*How can I best prepare and protect myself?*

*How will it impact my work?*

*Is my income secure?*

*Where is the safest place to be?*

*How will global governments respond?*

*Are those responses the right ones?*

Seeking the answers to these questions leads to increases in stress hormones and our brain's energy depletes. This doesn't make for good conditions for critical decision making or even for relating well with those we care about.

*It's really no surprise that people resort to panic buying or constant social media sharing.*

Building up supplies gives us a sense of certainty that even if other things fail we will have enough toilet paper and basic foods. Social media surfing is often seeking the information that feels like it reduces the uncertainty. Sharing that information with others may make us feel as though we are supporting others –even if the information is unreliable or just wrong.

These behaviours can give us a sense that we are at least doing something.

These behaviours help us to feel like we are in control of some aspect of our lives, even if they are maladaptive behaviours that have negative impacts on the rest of society -such as hoarding or sharing misinformation.

As each day brings a new normal it can feel like we are facing wave after wave of challenges. I can't promise to stop the waves but together I want us to learn to surf them so that we can face each new wave and get to the top of it, or get through it in some way and hopefully eventually we will come to smoother waters.



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## ***How can we can respond to ongoing uncertainty?***

Firstly and most importantly:

### **Know yourself and Notice yourself**

Now is the time to learn about you – your strengths and the areas you need support, and the areas you might like to change. Study yourself – but make sure it's with **curiosity and kindness** rather than criticism. Say to yourself “I've noticed that I...” or “I wonder why I just...” And be kind to yourself. This is not the time to call yourself names or beat yourself up about the way you are responding. Speak to yourself as you might a dear friend who is also in this challenging situation. What are some things you know and notice about you?

What are your strengths? What are the things you do that help you when you get to tough times? How do you help and encourage others?

Are you feeling anxious? Perhaps you often find it difficult to break your mind free from worries and concerns. Perhaps anxious thoughts are repeatedly going around in your head. Psychologists call this rumination – like a cow chewing on its cud over and over – we go over and over the worries and concerns. Often they can't be 'solved' so the constant brain focus doesn't lead to a helpful outcome. Is there a repeated thought that goes around in your head?

How do you feel when a wave of uncertainty hits you? What do you notice about the ways you respond? Are these ways helpful to you and those around you? Or are they not so helpful?

What other areas do you need support? Are you having difficulty sleeping or waking up in the morning? Are you having difficulty getting the things done that need to be done? Are you distracted by news sources and social media constantly seeking information to allay the uncertainty you are feeling? Are you forgetting to eat or constantly seeking sweet comforting food? (Or is that just me?)

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***Knowing yourself, noticing your patterns of behaviour and thoughts can help you find a practice to support yourself.***

Now that you are able to notice your responses, you need to build a new practice. In many industries now we are being reminded about PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) such as masks or gloves. I want our new practice of responding to the waves of uncertainty to follow FGF. Let me explain.



## ***F = Face the Feelings***

In the moment when anxiety floods us it isn't helpful to squash those feelings down, or to allow those feelings to put us into a panic. Instead be curious about them. "I notice that I'm feeling really anxious" or "here comes the sadness" or "my mind is thinking all these worrying thoughts." While you are noticing thoughts and feelings take a moment to feel the sensations in your body also. Notice where they are specifically. Take note of how the thoughts in your mind have made you feel in your stomach, in your head, in your jaw, in your shoulders or wherever else in your body you notice the tension.

## ***G = Ground yourself***

As you notice the difficult things in your body, place your feet firmly on the ground. Notice the parts of your body that are supported by the ground or the seat or bed you are on. Feel the chair beneath your legs or behind your back. Feel the support and the stability it gives you. Take a deep breath and push your feet into the floor. Straighten your back and breathe as though your breath is going up and down your spine. Stretch your arms out as you breathe in and out noticing the way the breath changes the feeling in your body. Open and close your fingers.

This is often referred to as a grounding or anchoring exercise. Its purpose isn't to distract you from your feelings or push your emotions away. Instead the purpose is to help you focus on what you can control.



## ***F = Focus***

Continuing with the focus you have gained from grounding yourself return to what you are doing. Take note of the location you are in and find three things around you that you hadn't noticed before. Notice the sounds around you – the louder ones and then the softer ones beneath. Now focus on what you were doing before the wave overtook you. Were you working on something for work? Doing something for family members? In a conversation with someone? Focus on who you want to be in that situation. If you are working – think of two words that describe the sort of worker do you want to be. If you are relating with someone think of two words to describe the friend, co-worker, boss, parent, sibling or partner you want to be. And then focus on acting in a way that supports those two word values.

Think of FGF as your emergency first aid that you will need to pull out many times over the next few weeks. It's a practice that you can use to support you in many situations.



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## ***What else can support you?***

### **Resources:**

#### **PEOPLE**

Often our best resources are the **people in our lives**. Our family, our friends, our workmates. You may be physically isolated from these people but you don't need to be socially isolated from them. Do the opposite – now more than ever, reach out to the important people in your life.

Make a time for a virtual catch-up –with screen on so you can see each other. Take the time to talk about the little things, the weather, the food you are eating, the things you are doing to take care of you and the big things; how you and they are feeling, how much you care and appreciate them. Again, hold these relationships with gentleness and compassion recognising that some more than others will find the anxiety difficult. Don't make too many suggestions or give too much advice, instead listen and acknowledge how hard it is for them and remind them how much you care about them.

Create virtual groups that make it easy for your group (family / friends / workmates) to support each other and be connected. Make a point of sharing the supportive and uplifting videos and memes and especially the funny ones. Humour is a powerful tool in changing our mood. Be careful not to let the group sharing to focus on the things that create anxiety while allowing people to acknowledge their anxiety. If they do become too negative, step away and take time out.

Ask for help and support when you need it and encourage others to do the same.

For those you are in isolation together with you may need to give each other time out and then time to come back together. For those with children this is not the time to be super strict but the time to begin gentle routines. Allow each other to have space and time for themselves. And then to come together and enjoy each other's company. (See also the Living in Isolation Resource - Coming Soon)



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## ***What else can support you?***

### **Resources:**

#### **VIRTUAL**

I'm not sharing links on the COVID-19. I assume you already know the health impacts and the advice of the CDC or your government in the current situation in your country.

Here I'm focusing on supporting your mental health and wellbeing.

#### **5 Ways to Wellbeing**

Many of you will be familiar with this model as I've shared it before. It can be adapted to your current situation. Let me know how you are using it. I will be updating this webinar in the future with a focus on 5 Ways to Wellbeing in Isolation.

#### **Mindfulness**

The FGF pattern is based on learning I have gained from [Dr Russ Harris](#) who is an expert in ACT. He has a great page of audio resources [here](#). The Dropping anchor exercises are guiding you through the Ground Yourself process. This page also has many other excellent resources.

#### **Strengths**

Learn your character strengths through this [questionnaire](#) and then consider how you can use them to assist you in this time.

**Warning** – be careful of spending all your time on virtual news sites or on social media where you are looking at news from other countries. This may not be helping your wellbeing. Ask yourself –“Is this helpful to me right now?” “Is there something else I could be doing that is more helpful?”

You are the globally minded people. You have lived in other countries and feel a deep sense of connection to people in many places around the world. Undoubtedly you will want to keep up with what is happening elsewhere. Be conscious of the impact this has on you. It may help to set time limits on your time in reviewing the news.

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## What else can support you?

### Resources:

#### ROUTINES AND RITUALS

The thing you can control is what you do each day. Depending on where you are and what degree of lockdown that place is experiencing you may have different limitations on your everyday life.

However, you determine what time you get up and what time you go to bed. If you are working from home you determine how much focus you bring to your work, when you take a break and what you do in those breaks. You are also in control of how and when you get some exercise, when you talk with friends, how much time you spend reading or gardening or watching movies or developing a hobby.

Think about your day and plan some general **routines** that bring you a sense of certainty and a pattern to your life. Allow that routine to have peaks and troughs; times of high intensity and focus, as well as times when you blob.

Create some **rituals** around certain points of your day.

When I call my family and friends I often make a cup of tea and encourage them to get a cuppa at their end of the call.

Many people find candles or air diffusers a good way to create and define a space with a different candle for the dinner table than the one on the work desk.

Those of you who are essential workers and are going out to work will have some cleaning rituals on returning home. Focus on these as a way to leave behind the days stressors as well as a way to protect those you love.

Dinner rituals of setting a table, sitting together, talking, savouring the food are all ways to create moments of focus and appreciation. Even if you are on your own in self isolation you can still create a sense of meals being an event, where you focus on appreciating the tastes and sensations of the food and are grateful for the nourishment and for any help in preparing it.

As parents, we know night time rituals (bath, book, talking in bed, dim lights then sleep) can help create a sense of calm before sleeping. Perhaps we also need to apply some of these rituals to the rhythm of our own days to help us transition into sleep.

Countries have created rituals of applauding and cheering the health professionals who are working so hard to save lives. See [this video](#) of Spain where people are separately but together recognising a certain time as the time to be grateful and encourage.

In this way, there are some things that are certain even amid overall uncertainty.



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"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo. "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF  
THE RING - J.R.R. TOLKIEN

Trisha Carter is an Organisational Psychologist whose work builds bridges of skilful understanding between cultures. She develops global skill-sets, such as cultural intelligence and psychological flexibility, in leaders and team members globally. Her business Trans Cultural Careers has consulted, trained and coached within organisations, for employees and their families moving to or from over 60 countries. The on-line business provides resources to enhance the wellbeing and effectiveness of expats and their families. Trisha believes that our global connectedness is our strength enabling us to innovate and to develop solutions to complex problems in, what can be, an increasingly volatile and uncertain world.

trisha@cicollective.com