

## Managing uncertainty during COVID-19

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Some of us are used to feeling are anxious a lot of the time and some of us are anxious occasionally. Either way, it is possible that you are finding yourself worried about COVID 19 and its consequences.

It is easy to get caught up in reading endless chatter on the internet and social media in the hope of finding out more information. However, this probably isn't helping your anxiety as it is often based on opinion, scaremongering, and guesswork rather than knowledge.

It is important to stay focussed only on the information which is evidenced and well sourced in order to manage anxiety. Below, we outline a number of ways to cope at this time. Who knows, you may even learn some skills for life!

### Understand uncertainty

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In the current climate, we are faced with changing cues that are continually taxing our fight/flight system. The lack of overall certainty causes this system to go into overdrive. Typical signs of this include racing thoughts, heart palpitations, physical pains and tightness of breath.

Remember: the fight/flight response depends on the interpretation of cues including what you are saying to yourself and what information you are paying attention to. So, you can manage the response and help to turn it off by engaging in practical and/or psychological tasks.

### Health and hype related tasks

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- 1) Know the facts. Check out the HSE information here:  
<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus.html>
- 2) Be aware of the official updates. Check this out on the RTE website here:  
<https://www.rte.ie/news/>
- 3) Do not spread information that is outside of these validated sources. This includes what you tweet/retweet, sending viral voice-notes or what you talk about to others.
- 4) Do your bit to reduce the risks by engaging in social distancing, self-isolating if you feel unwell, washing your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds before and after leaving the house, and anything else recommended by the HSE over the coming weeks.

### Personal practical tasks

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There are students at UL facing many different situations. Some are Limerick based students who are already at home; some are Irish students who need to travel back to another part of the country; some are Irish students who cannot travel home for whatever reason; and some are international students who have the additional concern of getting to their home country.

The impact of the COVID 19 will be different for all of you. No single student's concern is less valid than another student's concern.

No matter what your circumstance, ask yourself -what you can do to stay in control of your situation in order to lower the fight / flight system, for example:

- 1) What plan can I make to get me to where I want to be? (*This might be changing a flight home, looking up the next bus/train or arranging for a family member to come pick you up*).
- 2) What can I do right now that helps me cope? (*This might mean ringing or skyping your family or a friend and having a chat or it might mean going on a walk, getting some sleep, or getting something nutritious to eat*).
- 3) What can I stop doing that is not helping? (*This might mean not drinking, not taking drugs, not meeting groups of people, not staying in bed all day*).
- 4) Identifying some action that helps others. (*You might consider if a local community action group requires volunteers to support the vulnerable – provided this is safe to do*).
- 5) Identifying what your key concerns are and taking action to challenge those. (*For example, if you are concerned about what COVID 19 means for your course or grades, contact someone who is likely to be able to guide you in understanding that*).
- 6) Keep an eye on your UL emails so that you are aware of UL updates regarding closures, grades, coursework, etc.

Any practical actions (that do not include social engagement) will help you feel in control of yourself. Remember, you are in charge of meeting your needs in the now, no matter whether you are where you want to be or not.

## Psychological tasks

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So you have done all that is practically possible regarding COVID 19 and you still feel some anxiety. A dislike of uncertainty is an attitude that some people have towards life. You may be one of these people if you need a guarantee in life. You may say things like "I can't cope not knowing" or find it difficult to put a plan in place right now without a guaranteed resolution of current events.

People that find it difficult to tolerate uncertainty may find this pandemic situation anxiety-provoking and it may lead to a spike in worrying. Why? Worrying is often used as a way to exert control on a situation where we don't have any. But remember-worrying never equals certainty.

In reality, worrying about something cannot change the outcome of what will happen. The good news is that there are two key skills you can learn and use to manage the worry; challenging and accepting uncertainty. Let's look at both of these in turn....

### Challenging uncertainty:

Ask yourself the following questions to dissect your tolerance for uncertainty. Challenging yourself in this way can help you see that eliminating uncertainty is impossible. It's better for your mental health to accept that a certain degree of unpredictability is inevitable.

<p><b>Up to this point, have you had the ability to be absolutely certain about everything in life?</b></p>	
<p><b>What are the advantages of needing certainty?</b></p>	<p><b>What are the disadvantages of needing certainty?</b></p>
<p><b>Do you tend to predict that something bad will happen because you are uncertain?</b></p>	<p><b>What have you predicted and what is the likelihood that will happen?</b> If the likelihood is small, can you live with that? If the likelihood is big, do you understand why you have rated it as big? Does this tie in with the facts, or does this tie in with the fears?</p>
<p><b>Are there some uncertainties in your life that you can live with?</b> How do you do this? Can you do the same thing in this situation?</p>	<p><b>Talk to the people you know. Ask how the cope with the unpredictability of this situation.</b> Can you do the same thing?</p>

**Accepting uncertainty:**

Chances are that you probably came up with similar answers for how you deal with uncertainty and how other people do; *there's nothing I can do about it so I have to accept it.* Instead of focusing on the future and things that are out of your control, bring yourself back to the present. We suggest using the steps in the table below to help you accept uncertainty:

<p><b>Be Aware</b></p> <p>Notice what it is you are saying to yourself and how this makes you act and feel.</p>	<p>What do I find myself doing when I need certainty? (e.g. "I look to others for reassurance/I worry about things outside of my control")</p>
<p><b>Don't Respond</b></p> <p>Thinking something does not mean that you have to react or do anything about that thought. Observe the thought as just that – a thought. The thought itself can't do anything to you.</p>	<p>What can you tell yourself to help you not respond to your desire for certainty? (e.g. "I've felt these nerves before. I'm going to sit quietly for a few minutes and observe my thoughts and feelings")</p>
<p><b>Let Go</b></p> <p>Inform yourself that the need for certainty is not necessary. Try imagining the need for certainty as a cloud. Let that cloud drift off.</p>	<p>What can you tell yourself to help you let go of the yearning for certainty? (e.g. "I've let go of things that I have been uncertain about before. Hanging onto these thoughts does me no favours")</p>
<p><b>Anchor Yourself</b></p> <p>There are a number of ways to become present focussed. For instance, breathing exercises and mindfulness.</p>	<p>What can you tell yourself to be more present focused? (e.g. "I'm going to identify three objects in the room. Notice their colour, shape, size, material, and function")</p>
<p><b>Deal With An Active Mind</b></p> <p>Do not rebuke yourself if your mind wanders. Just notice that it has happened, be kind to yourself, and come back to being present.</p>	<p>What can you tell yourself to bring your attention back to the present when it wanders? (e.g. "I'm worrying again- I'm going to bring myself back to my breathing")</p>



*Take as much or as little of this information as is helpful to you. Remember, UL Éist is fully operational via phone or email throughout this uncertain period. Just like you can, we have found a way to be with the present moment, coping as best we can with the situation we find ourselves in. We are taking it day by day. You can too!*

*Wishing you good mental wellbeing.*

*The UL Éist team.*

Acknowledgement: The information within this document is drawn from clinical knowledge and 'Accepting Uncertainty' from the Centre for Clinical Interventions at <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/looking-after-yourself>

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