

Strategies for Accepting Uncertainty During COVID-19

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We recently came across a quote by Cleo Wade that said, “Just a friendly reminder – there is no right way to feel right now.” The sentiment hit home – hard.

Let's start by saying it's OK to feel whatever you are feeling in this moment. Maybe you're even feeling multiple things at once – happy to have more time with your kids and yet frustrated there's only so many things you can do to keep them entertained. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to cope with all the recent changes in your life.

Uncertainty is hard

Yes. That's right. Uncertainty can be hard to deal with. As humans, we like feeling that we are in control of what is happening.

Have you ever noticed your child seems to do better when you give them a choice? It can be something as simple as asking if they want apples or carrots for snack. This gives your child a sense of control while allowing you to set the options.

Right now, it can feel like you have little control over what is happening in the world. For most of us, that causes additional stress. By taking a step back and asking yourself, “What is in my control?” you may start to identify what you can do and what you can let go of trying to change.

As much as we may try, we can't control if others follow the rules of social distancing or masking. We can control how we, personally, follow CDC guidelines. We can't change how others react during this time, but we can limit how much news and social media we consume.

Accepting uncertainty

Accepting that this flood of uncertainty will be here for a while is even harder. We are facing so many unknowns right now. Many of us, when facing something difficult, want to try to fix it. It's an adaptive response. But, when we're facing something that doesn't have a clear solution, this can cause even more frustration.

We may also veer far away from problem-solving. Sometimes, we don't want to or know how to deal with a problem, so we simply avoid or ignore it. This can feel good in the short term, as it provides immediate relief, but usually catches up with us.

Think about this example: Have you ever been at the beach or the pool and tried to keep an inflated beach ball submerged underwater? It can be hard to do, as you're fighting gravity and the natural pull of the water. What happens when you let go of the beach ball? It goes flying in the air! That's because it takes a lot of effort to keep it underwater.

The same can be true when we're coping with our emotions. If we fight against them or try to hide or avoid them, we may explode or say something we didn't really mean. It's a natural urge to want to avoid thinking about all the COVID-19-related unknowns right now. It can even provide relief. But this avoidance takes energy, and it's short-lived: the beach ball will go flying out of our grip soon.

We do have another option. Acknowledging, validating and letting ourselves experience our feelings may be more helpful, and may provide the most relief in our current situation. If we strive to accept our emotions, it can be like letting the beach ball slowly float to the surface. It may take even be less effort!

Step one: be aware of your feelings

Pay attention to what you are feeling in your body, the physical sensations and emotions. Check in with yourself – where are you holding tension? Just like with the beach ball, pay attention to what is naturally occurring instead of trying to push it down.

If you can't figure out what you're feeling, it can be helpful to think of the word HALT. A lot of what we're feeling can come down to these basics.

H: Am I hungry? Sometimes we forget to meet our basic needs and simply need a snack. “Hanger” (that feeling when you’re both hungry and angry) is a real thing, and eating can be a solution.

A: Am I angry? Is there something that you're feeling mad about?

L: Am I lonely? We are social beings by nature and this pandemic has been hard on social interactions. Find creative ways to stay connected.

T: Am I tired? Sleep can have a huge impact on how we feel. Often stress can impact sleep, especially when those sneaky "what if" thoughts start to kick-in just as you are trying to fall asleep.

The same is true with your children. By going through this acronym with them, it may help you figure out what is underlying their irritation or mood.

Step two: express your feelings

Putting words to your emotions can help clarify how you’re feeling, and can contain and lessen the intensity of overwhelming emotions.

One helpful tool is an app called [Mood Meter](#), which helps you check in with yourself on two dimensions: high or low energy, and pleasant or unpleasant mood.

You can model this for children, e.g., “I’m feeling scared,” and try to notice your children’s emotions too, “I wonder if you’re feeling scared.”

Step three: validation & self-compassion

Validate what you’re feeling – don’t minimize your experience. This can be extremely powerful in demonstrating to your children that it’s OK to have a range of emotions. If we don’t model the behavior, we can’t expect our children to follow!

Self-compassion means offering ourselves the compassion that we so easily offer to other people in our lives. It means offering this kindness even – and especially – when we're focused on our perceived flaws. What would you say to a friend who told you they weren't good enough? Can you offer those same words to yourself?

Be kind to yourself. Maybe you’ve heard the quote, “Comparison is the thief of joy.” In other words, when we focus on what others are doing, it minimizes our own accomplishments. Seeing what others are posting on social media can cause us to be very self-critical. Remember that you're doing what works for you and your family. What your next-door neighbor from middle school is bragging about on social media does not mean what you’re doing is any less important.

Step four: being aware of your thoughts

Pay attention to the thoughts you're having. We are often consumed by the content of our thoughts – especially when we start to think about the what-ifs. You may find yourself spiraling through all the possibilities and ultimately feel worse afterwards. It's important to remember that your thoughts are simply that, thoughts. They are not good or bad, nor are they a reflection of who you are.

One helpful strategy is thinking about your thoughts as leaves on a stream. This visualization exercise may help you approach your thoughts in a different way:

- Start by getting comfortable. Maybe you want to uncross your legs or arms. Try focusing on something neutral in your environment. You may even close your eyes.
- Visualize being next to a stream of flowing water. Notice the leaves floating on the surface.
- Notice the thoughts that are entering your mind. Place each thought on a leaf and watch as it floats by.
- Place every thought on a leaf – positive, negative, neutral.
- You might try to rush the stream. Remember that the goal isn't to get rid of your thoughts but rather just to observe them. Try to let each leaf pass at its own pace.
- You may notice yourself saying “I'm not doing this right” or “This is ridiculous.” Place those thoughts on leaves and let them pass too.
- It is normal to find yourself getting distracted. When you find yourself getting sidetracked, bring yourself back to the stream and place your thoughts back on each leaf.
- You are observing. There is no judgment. Acknowledge the difficult thoughts and feelings by saying to yourself, “I notice myself having a feeling of _____” and gently place that thought on a leaf.

This is something that you can practice with your children, although it is generally more accessible for adolescents than younger children.

Additional resources:

Many of the ideas presented above are based in an approach called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). If you're interested in reading more, here are a few book recommendations for you and your child/ adolescent:

- [Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life: The New Acceptance & Commitment Therapy](#)
- [Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life for Teens: A Guide to Living an Extraordinary Life](#)
- [The Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living](#)
- [The Illustrated Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living](#)

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