



Embracing Uncertainty (Your "Negative Capability") ^[1]

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Throughout this course, you've learned that anxiety is a natural emotion to feel in the face of uncertainty (or presumed uncertainty). This final section leaves you with food for thought: How psychologists have classified human reactions to uncertainty and the concept of "Negative Capability" devised by poet John Keats.

"Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?"

- John Keats (1819)

Anxiety, as you are now well aware, is a complex human emotion. It is the product of an extended evolution of survival, a tool of imagination and forethought, and if not managed and coped with, can lead to catastrophic thinking and often overwhelming anxiety disorders. The emotion can be both a blessing and a curse for people living in today's harried world.

At heart, **anxiety is a stress reaction to an unknowable or imagined event**. Humanity's capacity for planning, creating, and manufacturing visions of better living come designed with a double edge. In our efforts to find patterns and rational explanations for arbitrary events, we can knowingly (and often unwittingly) create anxiety out of thin air!

Uncertainty Management

Psychologists have been fascinated by uncertainty ^[3] and how people manage their own fair share. Three traditions in psychology have specific view of the usefulness and manifestation of uncertainty and how people cope with unknowable potential:

- **Knowledge-Seekers** are people who are curious and actively pursue new knowledge and experiences. The act of seeking is an anxiety-mitigating endeavor, as any novel knowledge gained is a buffer against all of life's uncertainties. This view originated from psychoanalytic thinking.
- **Certainty-Maximizers** believe that humans, through the biology and reinforcement of learning principles, are naturally adapted to deal with the knowledge of uncertainty. By focusing on the negative consequences of uncertainty, we are motivated to learn skills to minimize uncertainty in our personal lives. Emotional and learning psychology traditions

spawned this view.

- Then there are the **Intuitive Statistician-Economists**. These people look at the statistics and probabilities of unknowable events and seek to rationalize and reduce uncertainty to its barest influence. They treat indecision and uncertainty with a "cost/benefit" mindset, settling on the most rational course of action or thought. This idea is the product of cognitive and perceptual psychology.

These categories are not hard-and-fast rules; many have fallen out of style in favor of newer theories of anxiety and uncertainty management. You are familiar now with the emotional and adaptive theories of anxiety, how human development and modern living demand reactions to uncertainty to spawn motivation and survival. There are other modern twists psychologists have brought into the uncertainty debate. Just a few are listed below:

- Terror-Management Theory [4] holds that all of human action—from small everyday acts of kindness to the motivations for going to war—are motivated by a lifelong existential dread. Our ability to speculate on our own mortality and to imagine a million potential futures is at the core of the human experience. Quite a bit of research now supports this overarching theory, most notably the famous hot sauce experiment [5].
- In sociology, Uncertainty Reduction Theory [6] attempts to explain the anxiety-reducing steps strangers go through upon first meeting. As social creatures, we are always trying to "figure out" the other person—what their motivations, thoughts, and intentions are. To cope with the uncertainty of engaging with someone new, our behavior typically follows three phases:
 1. **Introductions (Entry Stage)** – We exchange social greetings and culturally-specific behavioral norms (small talk, eye contact or not, etc.)
 2. **Detail-Sharing (Personal Phase)** – Strangers take turns sharing more personal views and values with each other. We probe one another to see where our values lie. If values match up, more emotional connection and deeper sharing ensues
 3. **Follow-Ups (Exit Phase)** – At the end of the interaction, the strangers decide if they want to continue developing their relationship. They either make plans to get together again (exchange phone numbers, invite the other person out, etc.) or mutually decide not to interact further
- Psychologists believe **heuristics** (mental shortcuts/shorthands for thinking and interpreting the world), **biases** (seeing the world through specific frameworks to the ignorance of others), and even **stereotypes** (large group categories under shared trait

umbrellas) exist as cognitive tools we routinely use to save our mental energies from constantly acknowledging the "gray area" and ambiguities inherent to living.

All of this is to say that uncertainty occupies an enormous amount of human thought and endeavor and, being the meaning-making creatures we are, we have many ways of managing thoughts of the unknown.

Live like a Poet

There is another outlook to consider when facing the unknown [7], the vastness of the possible, the infinite ways life can unfold. You can, little by little, begin living with uncertainty—accepting it as a natural function of life itself which cannot be rationalized, controlled, or stopped.

To people with anxiety issues, this may strike a very horrific chord. When you stop to think about it, however, the psychological principles and steps therapeutic approaches like Cognitive-Behavioral and mindfulness-based schools take are about **accepting that stress and anxiety are inevitable**. What matters is how you routinely assess and react to these situations when they arise; efforts to completely eliminate or control all outcomes only exacerbate anxious symptoms.

To embrace uncertainty, both in life and in art, is a concept beautifully encapsulated by Romantic poet John Keats's term "negative capability." [8] In his words [9]:

"The concept of Negative Capability is the ability to contemplate the world without the desire to try and reconcile contradictory aspects or fit it into closed and rational systems....Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason..."

To Keats, all of the contradictions, unknowables, and boundless potentialities that life presents us are part and parcel of living. Uncertainty is another force—like gravity or time—that must always be present, in fair or foul forms, for human ingenuity and efforts to mean anything.

Consider the many ways uncertainty can bring joy, mystery, and an unquenchable fascination to your own life. Consider how anxiety is both the impetus and impediment for human connection and achievement. Last of all, from time to time, tune into your own "*negative capability*." Seek to feel anxiety and fear in all of their forms, appreciate what these emotion can do, and define your life alongside anxious thoughts, not in spite of them.

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[5] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9523407> [6]

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