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Coping with Uncertainty in Uncertain Times

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Let's face it; right now in our world things are rather chaotic with the Coronavirus. We are bombarded by news, websites, social media, and even our own family's take on current events, facts, fears, and conspiracy theories. There's a lot of information to manage: What to keep? What to accept? What to toss? What to downright ignore?

Even though many of us enjoy spontaneity from time-to-time, most of us prefer to know that the foundation of our lives is safely cemented in some form of structure and predictability (having this base actually allows for natural spontaneity to occur!). The recent health events have shaken many of our personal foundations because the greater social structure on which we depend is no longer safely cemented. What does this mean? It means we are currently living in uncertain times. Times are uncertain because we can't do what we humans love to do, and that is to predict.

When we feel we can predict, we feel more in control. The ability to predict is ingrained in our psyche. For instance, "if I study really hard tonight, then I'll get a good grade on the test tomorrow;" or "I'm headed to the grocery store, and will pick up dinner, toothpaste, dog food and toilet paper." See where this is going? Your grocery list is a prediction/expectation list. Right now in 2020, we can't predict what will or won't be in our local grocery store. Therefore, life is unsettling because it is uncertain, and it is uncertain because we don't know what to expect, and therefore can no longer predict with certainty.

Emotion-Focused coping is healthy and adaptive coping in times of uncertainty, thus allowing the current situation to unfold without fighting it along the way. It's about conserving energy.

How do we cope with this? How do we cope in uncertain times? There is a small body of literature that we can draw from to help us with this. It comes from the cancer quality of life literature, because many cancer patients live with uncertainty, and psycho-oncologists have a pretty good handle on how to help those folks traverse through the cancer journey with better coping skills. And we can borrow from that, because we are currently traversing through an uncertain journey in our world.

Coping strategies can be categorized in several ways. One of the ways to categorized them is in two groups: "**Problem-Focused**" coping and "**Emotion-Focused**" coping. Problem-Focused coping strategies are usually solutions oriented (i.e., feeling flu-like symptoms and deciding whether to go to urgent care, or instead taking pain relief medicine and take a nap; or calling an elderly neighbor to check in on him/her and to offer help). Emotion-Focused coping strategies often embody more of an inward consideration and reflection (i.e., accepting the fact that there is no toilet paper left on the shelves, and realizing (or accepting) there is nothing you can really do about it). Emotion-Focused coping can also be active, such as processing your frustrations about the toilet paper issue with a friend. You can't change the situation, but you can at least talk about it.

When the situation you are in has certainty to it or is predictable in some way, then the best strategy to cope to reduce anxiety and stress, is to be Problem Focused. When you are actively involved in solving a problem, you are quite literally reducing your stress levels because you are taking charge of the situation or at least contributing to its solution. In the cancer literature, Problem-Focused Coping is helpful when patients have to choose between two really good treatments with similar outcomes and side effects. They become "active" in researching the treatments, gaining as much information as possible, weighing the treatment options against their quality of life, etc. The stress of having cancer at

this point in time is reduced due to the patient actively participating in the solution. Problem-Focused Coping is oriented to changing the situation.

When the situation you are in does not have certainty or is not predictable, then the best strategy to cope to reduce anxiety and stress, is to be Emotion Focused. The reason why Emotion-Focused coping works in uncertain situations is because it is the opposite of Problem-Focused coping. Problem-Focused coping requires energy. It is the “fight” in the fight/flight/freeze expression. It’s getting things done because there is a Problem to Solve. But if you don’t know the problem, or the problem is elusive, or the problem is a viral outbreak which governments are struggling with, then all that energy to Solve the Problem exponentially adds to stress and anxiety, it does NOT reduce it! Think of the idiom, “banging your head against a wall.” The wall isn’t moving, nothing you can do can break the wall, but you bang your head anyway, because you are trying to solve the problem. And all you get is frustration and a headache.

There is an expression in Chinese referred to as “Wu Wei” – meaning “effortless action” or for us Westerners, going with the flow.

Once cancer patients have chosen their cancer treatment, they are often advised to “accept” the treatment process and ride its wave, trusting in their medical team. Emotion-Focused coping is oriented to not changing the situation but adjusting yourself to fit the situation. There is no Problem to Solve anymore; what’s required of patients at this point is that they allow the medicine to treat their disease without fighting the process. The energy needed now is to nurture the self. Let’s be clear: Emotion-Focused coping isn’t “Passive coping” like we might think of “curling up in a ball” or “sticking our head in the sand” to avoid a situation. Emotion-Focused coping is healthy and adaptive coping in times of uncertainty, thus allowing the current situation to unfold without fighting it along the way. It’s about conserving energy. It’s acknowledging that the situation cannot be changed, no matter how much you want it to change. Acceptance. There is an expression in Chinese referred to as “Wu Wei” – meaning “effortless action” or for us Westerners, going with the flow.

With our current climate, how might you discern your energy? What are you doing to actively engage in problem solving, to reduce stress only in those situations you have control over? What are you doing to accept those situations in which you have no control? Are you fighting uncontrollable situations and creating more unnecessary stress? What flow can you go with to conserve your precious energy, and thus nurture yourself during this unsettling time? Below is a table of take-a-ways:

Problem-Focused Coping	Emotion-Focused Coping
Best for those Situations that can be CHANGED	Best for those Situations that CANNOT be changed
Examples	
Decision Making	Acceptance
Solving Problems	Changing the way you think (reframing)
Conflict Resolution	Exercising
Seeking Advice	Spiritual Prayer or Meditation
Gathering Information	Entertainment (playing board games, TV, etc)
Gathering Supplies	Engaging in Social Media
Social Planning	Social Visits
Characteristics	
Expelling Energy	Conserving Energy
Goal Oriented	Process Oriented
Courage to Change the Things I Can	Accept the Things I Cannot Change
<i>And the Wisdom to know the Difference!</i>	