

Your brain on uncertainty

The science and psychology
behind uncertainty

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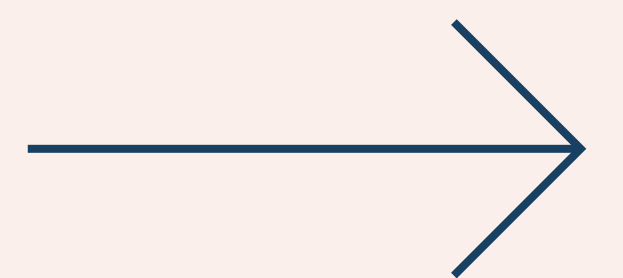
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What is uncertainty?

To be uncertain means to be in a state of unknowing.

Uncertainty is part of life and we can't escape that. But our brains, in an effort to protect us, have to work extra hard when the outcome of something isn't known.

Given the last 2+ years we've all had with the pandemic, unrest around the world and a workplace that is dramatically shifting, it's safe to say that our brains have been working serious overtime.



The top two priorities of the brain

Your brain has two main priorities:

- 1 **Don't die.** The primary function of the brain is to keep us safe.
- 2 **Conserve energy.** The second key function is to conserve energy so that, to fulfill the primary role, we don't die.



Why uncertainty threatens the brain

What threatens the safety of the brain more than most? **Uncertainty**. Our brains rely on knowledge, habits and rituals in order to save energy and survive.

So when things are uncertain, our brains have to expend energy figuring out how to keep us safe.



Why uncertainty threatens the brain

For example when we used to travel to work on the same route everyday, we'd go into autopilot, same route, same time, same destination.

If you compare that to what it's like going on holiday, when you have to figure out where the hotel is, where the local cafe is, do you need to speak another language... the brain is constantly on high alert.



What do our brains need when we're uncertain?

Reassurance

We need to know that things are going to be okay.

Connection

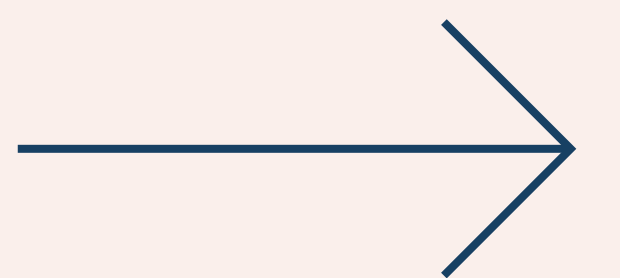
We need to connect with other human beings, something which has obviously been lacking over the last 18+ months.

Clarity

We need to limit the number of “what ifs” our brain has to process

Routine & ritual

We need to conserve energy, which lowers the threat response.



The post-lockdown paradox of choice

As life begins to navigate back to something a little more normal, we're being presented with a much larger freedom of choice.

But with this choice comes more uncertainty.

The more choice on offer to us, the less clarity we have and the more energy our brains have to spend figuring it out.

It becomes a delicate balancing act of "How much freedom of choice can I handle, without compromising on my own sense of safety, familiarity, rhythm and routine?"



We're all going to be experiencing uncertainty in different ways right now.

We might not be conscious of it, but the reality is that our brain is on high-alert after the last 2+ years, looking out for threats even if they aren't there.



To find out more about how uncertainty is affecting your teams, and how you can use it as a counterintuitive framework for building workplaces of the future, download our free Big Read:

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