

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

# Don't Let Uncertainty Paralyze You

by [Nathan Furr](#)

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When confronting a situation freighted with anxiety and ambiguity — a pandemic, a recession, a job loss, an unwanted family change — most of us can imagine no upside. We become paralyzed, caught in a state I call *unproductive uncertainty*. But some can see their way through such moments and find a positive path forward. How?

For the past five years I have studied people who excel in the face of uncertainty. My subjects have included innovators, entrepreneurs, CEOs, and Nobel prizewinners — along with gamblers, paramedics, and surfers. I’ve identified the approaches they use to navigate turbulent times and discover the potential hidden within them. In this article I share three habits that can help you develop your own “uncertainty capability.”

## Open Your Eyes to All Options, Present and Future

When threatened with unproductive uncertainty, we may become so focused on the immediate situation that we overlook the broader possibilities. This not only creates disquiet but can also lead us to make rash decisions or forgo opportunities because we don’t even recognize them. Psychologists call this tendency to miss the bigger picture status quo bias, big-fish-small-pond effect, and relative deprivation.

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One of my favorite illustrations of how narrow thinking leads to poor decisions comes from Malcolm Gladwell. Examining why university students choose to pursue STEM degrees (science, technology, engineering, and math), he found that at a typical U.S. university, students whose SAT scores put them among their school’s top

third had a 50% chance of pursuing a STEM degree, while those in the bottom third had only a 15% chance of doing so. He argued that the bottom third looked around, realized they weren’t as smart as their peers, and so chose easier majors. But when he analyzed SAT scores and STEM degrees among Harvard students, he found the same distribution. Why? Because human nature leads us to make decisions on the basis of our lived experience rather than with an eye on the bigger picture. The lowest-scoring Harvard students are certainly smart enough to succeed in STEM disciplines, but they can’t see that bigger picture and thus don’t give themselves the chance. By contrast, the innovators I studied have learned to look for possibilities where others can’t imagine them.

If we can remember there is a context vaster than we might initially have thought, filled with more possibilities than we might have envisioned, we are much more likely to find an optimal outcome. Most important, with that broader mindset we can weather the discomfort of unproductive uncertainty with greater optimism and calm. That's true whether the uncertainty relates to relatively small issues, such as missing a flight and wondering what to do with the unanticipated extra time, or to larger ones, such as losing a job and having to rethink our direction and priorities. We're able to recognize that even in worst-case scenarios, we have options marked by great beauty and recovery.

### **Think in Terms of Probabilities, not Binary Outcomes**

During times of unproductive uncertainty, we often get stuck imagining extreme either/or outcomes. Innovators who are adept at managing uncertainty think in terms of probabilities instead.

I saw the power of this first-hand while teaching an executive course at INSEAD just as the pandemic was accelerating. French President Emmanuel Macron was expected to give an address about the crisis; my international students started to worry that he would close the borders, leaving them stranded in France. When we thought in binary terms — stranded or not stranded — we all felt a great deal of anxiety. When we considered the full range of possible outcomes and assigned probabilities to them, we saw things differently. We realized there was a good chance the borders would be closed in a few days, a modest chance they would be closed sooner, and a near-zero chance they would be closed immediately. That brought us immense relief. The experience reminds me of French philosopher Michel de Montaigne's poignant observation: "My life has been full of terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened."

### **Remember That Possibilities Always Exist**

Is it really true that possibilities always exist, even amid the most painful unproductive uncertainty? Or is uncertainty capability an idea only for the privileged? Does the theory hold in times of grave and horrible tragedy? I recently reread Victor Frankl's account of his years in concentration camps and was struck by his emphasis on how

critical it was to their survival that prisoners could find meaning in their lives, even with their suffering. His conclusion is a powerful testament to the potential for growth even in unthinkable circumstances. He wrote: “Everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of human freedoms — to choose one’s attitude in a given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” The opportunity to exercise that freedom is available to all of us — and it is key to finding a way forward in uncertain times.

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