Our brains don’t like uncertainty, but research offers clues for how to cope

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severely this new variant will land, and how well the vaccines will hold the line against it, will take weeks for petri dishes and infection rates to reveal. So, just in time for families hopping flights to long-awaited festivities. Do we take our chances? Crawl under the covers and wait for clarity?

A psychology experiment once found that people experienced less stress when anticipating a guaranteed electric shock than a random one that might be happen. In the real world, scientist could only warn that a bigger, faster variant might be coming, sometime. This is the grand pandemic experiment none of us volunteered for: COVID-19 prefers to zap us just when we think it is relatively safe again.

But we can coach our brains, weary as they are, to be better at managing this unpredictable world, and even become happier in it – so promise researchers who study mindfulness, attention and the brain’s general allergy to uncertainty.

For starters, this kind of moment – the unexpected threat – is where the brain really performs. If you felt a wave of anxiety upon learning about Omicron, that is what Michel Dugas, a researcher at the Université du Québec en Outaouais, calls the brain’s smoke detector. “There might be a fire or maybe the toast is burnt,” he says, but, until that’s clear, anxiety is how the brain warns itself to be vigilant. In this case, the Omicron-induced threat-detection system hopefully reminded people to wear masks, be careful in large crowds and get vaccinated – anxiety working to our advantage, says Dr. Dugas. “What anxiety does is motivates us to protect ourselves, to protect the ones we love.”

A high intolerance to uncertainty, however, is a strong predictor of generalized anxiety disorder. Dr. Dugas led the Quebec team of researchers who developed a psychological scale now used to to confirm a diagnosis of GAD, and to guide treatment, by quantifying how
claim responsibility for those programs

But worry drains our finite supply of attention, says Dr. Amishi Jha, professor of psychology at the University of Miami and the author of the recent book *Peak Mind*. “The notion of our attention being only for math problems or decision-making is false,” she says. “We actually need it to regulate our emotions and to connect with other people.” She studies how to reduce distracting rumination and sustain attention among people whose jobs are defined by unpredictability, such as soldiers and emergency responders. Her work has found that simple mindfulness exercises – such as a few minutes of guided meditation – can keep a person’s focus, even when they are placed in longer periods of stress.

Mindfulness, Dr. Jha says, trains a person to observe the negative toll that excessive worry takes on their physical and mental state, and to acknowledge that thoughts don’t equal reality. She suggests people try to take a birds-eye view when they worry; seen from a distance, she suggests, it can be easier to put unhelpful looping thoughts in a more objective context. Keeping our attention where it is most useful is important during this pandemic, she says, when people need to remain focused on what matters, including following public health guidelines to stay safe.

But paying attention to what matters, rationalizing away worries, not sweating the small stuff, may all feel harder the longer the pandemic lasts – which is why getting good sleep, eating well, being present in the moment are important wellness practices. “COVID-19 is a great example of a chronic psychological stressor,” says Kristin Buhr, a clinical psychologist in North Vancouver, who worked on developing the intolerance-to-uncertainty scale with Dr. Dugas. But she says that what often separates people who manage uncertainty better than others are three core beliefs: they think life generally works out; when life doesn’t work out, it’s not usually catastrophic; and they can handle whatever happens. These are
wish things were different.’ When you drop the rope, COVID-19 is still floating in the background, but you’re not wasting valuable resources, fighting something you can’t change.”

If that is clear in concept, but harder in practice, don’t be too hard yourself. Elevated symptoms of anxiety and depression are normal right now, mental health clinicians point out: this is an anxiety-inducing, disappointing time. The true psychological fallout of the pandemic won’t be entirely clear for years, and vulnerable groups in the population will require more intensive interventions. But surveys at different stages of the pandemic have also shown that most Canadians are managing reasonably, even surprisingly, well.

Another important buffer against these stressful times is self-compassion. In an Alberta survey of high school students, which collected data as recently as October, teens most likely to support statements such as I am giving myself the care and tenderness I need, or I am trying to keep things in perspective, also demonstrated more signs of resilience, even if they still felt sad or worried.

Kelly Schwartz, a psychology professor at the University of Calgary, and lead researcher for the survey, says it is important not to pathologize normal emotions, but to emphasize, especially to teenagers, the coping skills they are likely already using to make the best of an uncertain time. “Resilience does not mean 100 per cent functioning,” says Dr. Schwartz. “It means that you are finding way to adapt to these adverse experiences.”

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