

Desiree Dickerson, PhD - A healthier approach to research.

Navigating Uncertainty in Research



There is no handbook for **navigating our research careers**, certainly not one that addresses how to navigate the uncertainty that we face in this space. Uncertainty shows up in both our **day-to-day challenges** – will this experiment work? will reading this paper be useful or a waste of time?– as well as in the **big questions** that seem ever present. It is common to navigate research constantly in **survival mode**: worrying, fearing, in doubt. But we can learn to buffer ourselves against some of these stressors, and learn to **handle uncertainty in a healthier way**.

Our reality

Academia is filled with uncertainty.

Uncertainty is stress-inducing. We are wired to seek out control. Uncertainty is a threat.

A constant sacrifice. Anxious about our uncertain future, we work harder and longer, trying to sprint through an ultramarathon.

Embracing uncertainty

Uncertainty fuels our worries and anxiety.

And this cannot be resolved by creating certainty. The future **is** uncertain.

But we can learn to **navigate uncertainty in a healthier way**. We can learn to **tolerate the discomfort** of not having full information or not knowing how things will unfold.

Things we can control

Prioritise your mental health and well-being. Uncertainty feels bigger and scarier when you have no energy to deal with it.

Accept your emotions. Trying to fight how we feel often increases our distress. **Acknowledge your emotions** ("I am feeling upset/angry/jealous"), **sit with the feeling** (don't judge yourself) and recognise that **it will pass** and you will cope. You always do.

Managing stress in the moment

There is no one-size-fits-all for how to cope.

Check in with your expectations. "What is reasonable right now?" Set your to-do list accordingly.

Give yourself permission to do less, to achieve less.

Set **a solid foundation** - Sleep, Exercise, Nutrition and Socialising.

Check in with hurtful coping strategies you might be using (e.g. alcohol use). Find alternatives for your wind-down moments.

The role of worry & uncertainty

We are wired to seek out control. In the face of uncertainty, we tend to worry in an attempt to control.

We believe worry will keep us safe, help us see threats, help us prepare. But worry is a coping mechanism - **an illusion of control**.

The physical sensations that go with worry, make our worry feel real, important, and justified. It is a vicious cycle.

Worry ≠ problem solving

Worry is a habit.

Ask yourself: "Will worrying about this now change anything?"

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Micro-changes for impact

Micro-change #1

Give yourself permission.

Permission to feel exhausted or completely overwhelmed. Permission to say "No" and to let go of unrealistic expectations.

Negative emotions are not something you need to eradicate, rewrite or ignore. Give yourself permission to feel them.

Micro-change #2

Sleep better.

Buy an old-school clock radio. Leave your phone outside of the bedroom. That blue light and your night-time 'doom-scrolling' are ruining your sleep.

Micro-change #3

Start small, start now.

Want to start a new habit? Start small. Often initiating the action is far more overwhelming than the action itself - so set yourself one small action and start it now.

Micro-change #4

Box breathing.

This is especially helpful to do in moments of stress and overwhelm to get you back to a state of calm:

Breathe in 4, hold 4, out 4, hold 4, repeat.

Micro-change #5

The toilet check-in.

When in the toilet, take advantage of the privacy and lack of distraction and use those few minutes to stop, to breathe, to check your posture and your headspace. Find the points of tension and release them. Ask yourself "What do I need right now to keep going"?

Micro-change #6

Take breaks often.

Make sure you stand up and move around often - even just a short walk around the block can make a big difference. Make sure you readjust your eyesight too - look into the distance, it will give you both a physical and mental break.

Micro-change #7

Celebrate the wins.

However small they are. Whenever you tick a box, give yourself a 5-minute break and do a victory dance.

Micro-change #8

Create a go-to healthy strategies list.

Make a list of healthy go-to strategies that help to make you feel better, relieve tension, that fill your bucket. Have them on hand so that you have them ready to simply choose from in the moments you most need them.

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