



## **Well@Work Podcast Season 2, Episode 20: Managing Uncertainty**

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. In this episode, Emily Smith gives some tips for managing uncertainty in the workplace.

Uncertainty is a part of life. Things change quickly, something we have seen during the continuing COVID pandemic. There is no guarantee that what we plan to happen will actually happen. Some enjoy that their work day is never the same day twice, but some find the lack of predictability stressful. Over time, it can become difficult to manage so much uncertainty, leading to frequent worries, resistance to change, or even a worsening of symptoms of burnout, depression, or anxiety. Reaching your limit is a normal reaction to uncertainty, but there are ways to remain tolerant of the uncertainty associated with the COVID pandemic. In this Well@Work podcast, I'll share some tips to help you remain psychologically flexible, boost your well-being, and regain a feeling of control when uncertainty feels like the only constant.

Uncertainty has been found to increase symptoms of anxiety and depression. Intolerance to the unpredictability of life may lead to frequent worrying and vulnerability to stress. When uncertainty is seen as a danger, instead of as an exciting opportunity, it can undermine quality of life and may lead to chronic stress. The chronic stress associated with negative perceptions of uncertainty can also impact the body. As the stress from uncertainty turns to anxiety, our fight, flight, or freeze instinct is triggered by the body's autonomic nervous system. This can lead to immediate physical changes like rapid breathing or increased heart rate, but research shows that there are also long-term health consequences that can occur. Inflammation, high blood pressure, and changes in the brain that contribute to anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses may result from chronic stress.

Uncertainty is something that Kaila has been struggling with recently. Kaila is a substance abuse counselor at a community mental health system in a community hit hard by the pandemic. Her supervisor recently left for another job, leaving Kaila as the sole substance abuse counselor to serve four different offices. After a recent staff meeting, Kaila was confused by changes made to clinical protocol, but wasn't able to ask for clarification because she doesn't know who she reports to anymore. And this morning, after Kaila received word that two of her clients tested positive for COVID, she can't find the most recent quarantine requirements in her inbox, so she isn't sure what to do. In a community highly impacted by both substance use disorder and the COVID pandemic, Kaila finds that all of the confusion and uncertainty compromise the quality of care she can provide.

So what can Kaila do?

Tip 1: control what you can. While it may seem that COVID has added new unexpected elements outside of our control, making mindful choices can help us to regain a sense of control. Create a regular routine that is meaningful to you. For example, have a quiet moment in the morning to practice mindfulness, journal, have a cup of coffee, read the paper. Whatever it is, something that you enjoy and that you can control. You can repeat this throughout the day or at night. This will reduce the stress of unpredictability. Scheduling apps can allow you to build focused time into your day, remind you to take a break to eat or stretch, and offer a sense of control and organization in uncertain times.

Tip 2: be present in the moment. Worrying about what might happen in the future takes us out of the here and now. Focus on acknowledging what is happening right now, notice your surroundings without judgment. Being present in the here and now is challenging and takes practice, so start small. Try working on tasks one at a time, pausing for a breath before moving to the next one. Or slowly savor a sip of your favorite beverage. Take a few seconds to scan the environment around, you noticing the permanency of all things. Over time, being present in the moment can change your perspective, helping to reduce the need to control everything that happens.

Tip 3: reflect on past successes. It isn't vain to remind yourself of your accomplishments, it can link you with your core goals and values and lead you to future successes. Instead of wondering if you can adjust to these new changes, reflecting on your past successes can remind you that you have encountered uncertainty before and you were able to successfully address the challenges.

Tip 4: ask for help. When you find that uncertainty has led to increased anxiety or depression or if workplace uncertainty is increasing your symptoms of burnout, get some help. Your workplace EAP or a clinical counselor can help you take the steps you need in order to address these symptoms.

The COVID pandemic has brought on new experiences, new expectations, new schedules. And just when we get used to all this newness, something changes. By using these strategies to build resilience, it may become easier to bounce back from the stresses of uncertainty and to stay Well@Work.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast. Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.