Uncertainty certainly makes life interesting. Without it, we’d be locked in a repetitive experiential loop. Because the future, by its very nature, is yet to unfold, what it holds for us is largely unknown. For example, we know we will die, but when and how are largely a mystery. However, the future is unavoidable and must be confronted; how we do that, and the frame of mind we employ to do so are the research reserve of those examining the psychology of uncertain situations – when prediction is impossible. It is a field of study with its fair share of dark corners, including how to operate more efficiently in the face of uncertainty. A new research is helping point a light in that direction.

Rethinking our relationship with uncertainty

In a review published in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, Dr Jessica Alquist, Associate Professor at Texas Tech University, USA has collaborated with veteran social psychologist Professor Roy F Baumeister to take a deep dive into uncertainty; it is a comprehensive examination of how uncertainty influences behaviour, decision-making, and emotional responses. It also encourages us to rethink our relationship with uncertainty.

Firstly, while it’s tempting to think of uncertainty as some ethereal, untouchable construct, uncertain situations are not entirely outside our control. There are essentially two types of uncertainty: objective or future uncertainty – tied to future events not yet determined, and subjective uncertainty – the experience of not knowing something. The outcome of a still-to-be-played football match is an example of objective uncertainty, but a finished match, the outcome of which you are unaware, is an example of purely subjective uncertainty – the outcome is factually certain, just not by yourself.

Secondly, our reaction to uncertainty differs according to its type. Because subjective uncertainty involves a situation people cannot influence, it often inhibits action, encourages the conservation of resources, and stimulates information seeking. In contrast, objective uncertainty, conversely, prompts action and risk-taking.

There are essentially two types of uncertainty: objective or future uncertainty – tied to future events not yet determined, and subjective uncertainty – the experience of not knowing something.
Intersecting uncertainties

Aquist and Baumeister have shaken our understanding of uncertainty. We may still be able to influence outcomes when they haven’t yet been determined. Actions in such circumstances help cope with the uncertainty – it gives a sense of doing something proactive instead of being resigned to fate, even if the action doesn’t guarantee a positive outcome. So, being aware of uncertainty can be advantageous. When people are aware the outcome of a situation cannot be predicted (termed ‘objective uncertainty’), they see it as a call for action to steer events towards favourable outcomes, and subjective uncertainty injects novelty and a sense of discovery into a situation.

Subjective and objective uncertainty are not unrelated – they continually intersect in our lives, and Aquist and Baumeister have designed a 2x2 matrix that represents this (Figure 1). The matrix depicts the possible scenarios at the interplay between objective uncertainty and objective certainty (where the outcome has been determined) and subjective uncertainty and subjective certainty, as well as the optimal responses. As a model for making sense of uncertainty, it provides a little more confidence for dealing with what the future has in store for us.

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Subjective Uncertainty

The authors always strive to be competitive but have no financial interest in any specific conclusion.