

Finding Comfort in Uncertainty: Dealing with Anxiety Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

As a graduate student aiming to finish my studies in the United States, I was never really bothered when I first learned about the new coronavirus outbreak in China as life in the US was very much normal back then. More importantly, I had a strong belief that my family in the Philippines would not be affected. It was only after hearing about the rising cases of local COVID-19 transmissions, community lockdowns, and stories from friends about their relatives getting infected that I started to feel anxious. As I dealt with my anxiety, I found myself trying to settle the tension between wanting to know more about the relevant happenings in my home country and intending to avoid worrisome information. On the one hand, there was a desire to achieve some degree of certainty. On the other, more knowledge also meant greater degree of apprehension about the pandemic's detrimental impact on various aspects of our lives. In this essay, I attempt to problematize the relation between uncertainty and anxiety. I challenge the prevailing assumption that reducing uncertainty always provides us relief and confidence. Like many other scholars of uncertainty, I argue that in times of despair, uncertainty may become a source of positive outlook and may serve as a motivation to maintain and reinforce interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it is not always a negative concept and experience.

Keywords: anxiety, COVID-19, pandemic, personal reflection, uncertainty

COVID-19, UNCERTAINTY, AND ANXIETY

Since I left the Philippines to pursue graduate studies here in the United States, I would make it a point to call my family constantly as my way of detaching myself from exhausting academic work and dealing with homesickness. It was during a video call with my father, either in late December 2019 or in early January 2020, when I first learned about the coronavirus outbreak in China. I was not worried as my daily activities at that time were still much the same. I heard some news about it, but it did not bother me too much. It was still abstract to me at that point. That is, I knew about the outbreak's existence, and I believed it to be true, but I had not seen it as a real threat that could have a disrupting impact on our lives.

It was in March of 2020 when I realized the gravity of the pandemic. I could no longer downplay the rapid spread of COVID-19 as our university announced the transition to online learning. The semester was supposed to end in May, but the university officials decided that after the March spring break, students would no longer be permitted to attend in-person classes. I remember calling my father to tell him the news. He was not surprised because it was the same time when the Philippine government started to implement lockdown measures. From then on, getting updates from online news sources had become part of my daily routine. I also talked to my friends from time to time. For one, I was curious how the current administration would handle this public health emergency considering that a number of its officials somewhat ignored much earlier calls to impose stricter policies for the entry of individuals coming from areas greatly affected by COVID-19. More importantly, because I was aware that the Philippines was not prepared for a crisis of this magnitude, I became deeply concerned about how the virus would impact the lives of my loved ones.

After weeks of spending time on the Internet to find the latest information about the Filipinos' plights amidst the pandemic, I began to feel anxious. Looking back, there were three likely reasons for this kind and level of anxiety. First, being physically away from my family and home country definitely induced some apprehension. There was a mental and psychological struggle in the idea that I could not be with them during these difficult times. Second, the threat of the virus was slowly becoming part of my reality. When the state government issued "safer at home" orders, I realized that the pandemic had already reached a global scale. Although the situation in the US was much better than that in the Philippines (at least in terms of having more resources at the government's disposal), I still could not easily dismiss the destructive effects of the virus. Third, the information I was consuming, whether from accounts of people close to me or through various news sources, aggravated my anxiety.

I usually view anxiety as an unpleasant emotional state. However, in the context where I was experiencing it, I comprehended its other side. Anxiety made me feel connected to home in the sense that I shared my family's fears and worries, but it was an unwelcome distraction from my goal to

complete my studies as soon as possible. The first point is a validation that even though anxiety is often associated with negative emotions, it may allow us to stay attached to our interpersonal circles. Indeed, there is something positive in recognizing that my anxiety was primarily brought about by my concern for the people I value. Despite this though, I knew that I had to manage it in such a manner that it would not impair my regular functioning.

My initial response to my growing anxiety was to seek more information about COVID-19 in hopes that by acquiring more knowledge about its nature, my level of uncertainty would decrease. I further thought that uncertainty reduction would also mean anxiety de-escalation. I imagined a positive relationship between them, and this assumption was not at all baseless. The logic behind this lies in the conceptualizations of the two phenomena. Gudykunst and Nishida (2001, 59) established the connection between uncertainty and anxiety by describing the latter as the affective counterpart of the former. From this, it is evident that uncertainty, being a perceptual experience or a cognitive episode (Duronto, Nishida, and Nakayama 2005, 551), manifests itself in the realm of emotions in the form of anxiety. It makes sense, then, for many people to aim to be more certain as they believe that achieving a higher degree of certainty may eventually lead to a lower level of anxiety.

In the process of lowering uncertainty, many of us endeavor to obtain more information. Perhaps we subscribe to the notion that collecting more pieces of the puzzle empowers us to move forward. We believe that more information equips us with more knowledge which informs our decisions and influences our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. We even assume (sometimes unconsciously) that information seeking is the only way to reach certainty. Although there is no doubt that getting information (whether actively or passively) is a means of processing and dealing with uncertainty (Brashers et al. 2000, 70-71), it is problematic to contend that all kinds of uncertainty necessitate information seeking. As Brashers et al. (2000, 69-77) pointed out, individuals have different methods of managing uncertainty. According to them, in some cases, people prefer to look actively for information to reduce their uncertainty. In other instances, individuals intentionally refuse to accumulate more information so that they can sustain their uncertainty. Even if their research was conducted in the context of health communication, the results of their study are also applicable to other settings of human interaction. Apart from suggesting that people employ various mechanisms to deal with uncertainty, their findings also illuminate the often-neglected feature of uncertainty—that it is not always an undesirable experience. Babrow, Hines, and Kasch (2000, 53) shared a similar viewpoint by arguing that uncertainty has many different types and forms, and not all of these are necessarily negative.

As we attempt to decrease anxiety via uncertainty reduction which we pursue through obtaining information, we tend to overlook some crucial points. First, gathering more information does not always translate into uncertainty reduction (but it definitely can in particular communicative acts).

Babrow (2016, 1391) articulated this well by stating that scholars who examine problematic integration posit that uncertainty may stem not only from the absence and insufficiency of information but even from having too much, inconsistent, unreliable, or irrelevant information. Based on this conceptualization which underscores the multifaceted conceptual structure of uncertainty, it is apparent that securing information alone does not guarantee effective uncertainty management. Second, maintaining uncertainty may be essential in preserving our positive functioning or supporting our psychological well-being (Brashers et al. 2000, 78). This indicates that even if we accept the proposition that information seeking may result in uncertainty reduction, we nevertheless need to ask ourselves if reducing uncertainty is the best way to deal with the situation we face. Third, and in connection with the second, if reducing uncertainty does not work to our advantage in the sense that it does not lower anxiety, perhaps we need to reexamine our presumption that certainty is an indispensable tool to decrease anxiety.

As I became increasingly aware of the nature of the new coronavirus and the detrimental effects of the pandemic, I was able to lower my uncertainty. In this case, seeking information resulted in uncertainty reduction. However, the kind of certainty I achieved exacerbated my anxiety. That is, although I accomplished my goal of reaching some level of certainty, I failed to control my anxiety. Hearing the disheartening stories of Filipinos trying to survive the economic hardships brought about by the pandemic made me more certain that my home country could not handle this public health crisis competently. As I communicated more with my immediate family, relatives, and friends, I became more cognizant of the inefficiency of the systems in place. Therefore, instead of gaining comfort and confidence through uncertainty reduction, I found myself getting more worried as I received various information that confirmed my pessimistic views about the Philippine government's management of the health emergency. I came to a conclusion, then, that under particular circumstances, there is benefit in being uncertain. As human beings, we may find relief in not knowing. In short, it might be better to remain uncertain if certainty would cause unstable mental and psychological health.

Babrow and Striley (2015, 106), in their discussion of selected communication frameworks that scrutinize the concept of uncertainty, stated that one of the propositions of uncertainty management theory rests on the premise that uncertainty does not require reduction all the time. This suggests that uncertainty could be beneficial to someone, especially if it offers a layer protection against unwanted stressful events or if it maintains the person's good mental state. Brashers et al. (2000, 78) made the same argument by claiming that people do not always strive to attain certainty as there are conditions where intensifying uncertainty leads to psychological balance. They also mentioned that "opportunity appraisals, associated with hope or optimism, were managed by attempts to maintain or increase uncertainty" (Brashers et al. 2000, 77). Upon reflecting on my experience and connecting it with this conclusion, I grasped the idea that uncertainty reduction might not always lead to anxiety de-escalation

and that uncertainty could be a source of positive attitudes and beliefs. Further, I realized that it may have the capacity to strengthen relational commitments, thus, uncertainty is not inherently damaging.

UNCERTAINTY AS A SOURCE OF POSITIVE DISPOSITION

Although much of the scholarly work associated with the perspectives briefly described in the preceding segments are mostly related to health communication, they can provide insights about uncertainty in general. Following the thought that uncertainty escalation may aid in anxiety management, I argue that uncertainty can be a good source of positive disposition. Being uncertain about the COVID-19 situation in the Philippines and being unsure whether my family and friends would surmount the difficulties triggered by the pandemic gave me a sense of hope. These thoughts allowed me to stay optimistic in the sense that my uncertainty was, tantamount to claiming the possibility that something desirable might happen. In other words, the absence of absolute certainty accommodated the probability of welcoming a favorable outcome. Simply put, it was extremely challenging to manage anxiety while getting information (to decrease uncertainty and consequently increase certainty) which affirmed my belief that the Philippines government's response to the COVID-19 predicament was ineffective.

Even though I recognized that certainty was not alleviating my anxiety, I did not completely abandon my initial objective of acquiring more facts about the virus and knowing the relevant occurrences back home. Instead, I aimed to strike a balance between seeking information and addressing my anxiety through uncertainty management strategies that worked effectively for me. For instance, on less stressful days, I engaged in conversations about the worsening state of the Philippine public healthcare system; but whenever I was exhausted from academic work, I chose to distance myself from discouraging stories and news. This technique enabled me to develop a more positive disposition, which, in turn, helped me to deal more effectively with my anxiety. This coping mechanism involved maintaining uncertainty while gaining some certainty but not to the extent that it would produce too much discomfort. Indeed, I agree with Brashers et al.'s (2000) claim that "uncertainty management may involve negotiating a desire for information at the same time one is managing anxiety" (81). Moreover, I contend that upon mediating these two seemingly competing phenomena, we may stay optimistic despite the presence of perceived threats in our lives.

UNCERTAINTY AS A MOTIVATION TO REINFORCE RELATIONAL TIES

What I observed from my experience was that my uncertainty also urged me to strengthen my interpersonal relational ties in at least three significant ways. First, I endeavored to forge stronger

emotional bonds with my loved ones. Although the available modes of expressing my affection for them were limited (as we were not together physically), I did what I could to make them feel loved and valued. I made even the smallest gestures to communicate my care for them. Undeniably, COVID-19 allowed me to comprehend life's fragility. It made me acknowledge the fact that pandemic-related uncertainty included being unsure about life itself. From this, I learned that the absence of uncertainty could make us exceedingly complacent. Certainty, in some cases, would make us feel too comfortable to the point of blinding us to possible life disruptions.

Second, being uncertain gave me the opportunity to connect and reconnect with others. Even if there were instances where I purposely avoided communicating with some people to keep my uncertainty (thus, manage my anxiety), I should note that on these occasions, it was not interacting with other individuals that I tried to evade but being exposed to unhelpful information. Therefore, in some instances, I had to make feedforward or send signals that I was not very open to discussing pandemic-related issues. In general though, talking to friends, colleagues, and even acquaintances aided me in reducing my anxiety. More importantly, our exchanges strengthened our ties. The uncertainty brought about by COVID-19 afforded us a common ground. All of a sudden, the world was much smaller. In an instant, we were all concerned about the same thing. Shared uncertainty became our unifying element. It felt good to know that I was not the only one undergoing that kind of anxiety.

Third, uncertainty pushed me to be more expressive. The thought of being unsure about what could happen next forced me to be more articulate about my feelings, which resulted in more meaningful interpersonal interactions. Uncertainty inspired me to be more generous in conveying my emotions. It taught me to grab every chance to communicate my affection for people close to me. Undoubtedly, an aspect of uncertainty reminded me of the temporariness of human affairs. For all these reasons, I now uphold the presupposition that uncertainty has the potential to be a positive experience because it can function as a motivation to deepen our interpersonal relationships.

In arguing that uncertainty may serve as a source of positive disposition and as a motivation to reinforce relational ties, I assert that it can be life-affirming. This alternative standpoint encourages us to adopt a different perspective and accommodate the assumption that uncertainty does not automatically limit our ways of living. Moreover, it allows us to construct a unique means of responding to anxiety-inducing events. As social beings, we have a broad range of experiences that likely shape our varied appreciations of uncertainty. Therefore, it is expected that we have diverse modes of dealing with it depending on our orientations (Shuper et al. 2004, 460). It is too restrictive, then, to claim that we all attempt to decrease it. In my case, for example, I found comfort in maintaining it.

Uncertainty is an unavoidable component of our lives (Salvador 2011, 35). It seems nearly impossible to form and preserve interpersonal connections without encountering the slightest degree of

uncertainty. Because it appears that all our interactions involve some level of uncertainty, we are left with no other option but to confront it. In fact, even ignoring it is indicative of how we react to uncertainty. As we aim to manage it, it is critical for us to consider the outcome that we intend to achieve. Do we anticipate that decreasing it would lead to more meaningful affinities? Do we believe that increasing it would help us attend to our tasks more efficiently? The answers to these (and other similar) questions should inform the way we handle uncertainty.

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