

PSYCHOLOGY

The Virtues of Not Knowing

How relishing uncertainty can make us better thinkers and neighbors.

BY MAGGIE JACKSON November 20, 2023



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I am going to show you some pictures. Tell me whether each is more like a dog or a cat.” With these brief instructions, a pioneering University of California, Berkeley psychologist began giving people so-called tests of perception that were in fact extraordinary barometers of their capacity to relish the twists and turns of life.

Participants were shown a series of drawings of an animal that at first distinctly resembled a cat but then, bit by bit, with a tweak to an ear or a broadening of a muzzle, turned fully canine. The middle pictures were indeterminate, and for some, that proved unnerving. Again and again, these participants refused to surrender the safe harbor of their first answer until the sequence was nearly complete. They showed “a preference to escape into whatever seems definite,” wrote the researcher Else Frenkel-Brunswik.

The famous cat–dog experiments were part of a postwar search by some of the world’s leading scientists for the roots of authoritarianism and prejudice. What Frenkel-Brunswik discovered for her part was a key signature of the closed mind: intolerance of uncertainty.

Reaping the promise of not-knowing depends on a simple rubric: whether people are intent on eradicating uncertainty or are willing to stay open to it and so to a situation’s subtleties and complexities. This is a decision made in the moment yet one that also emerges from an individual’s personal comfort zone



“Being uncertain means that I lack confidence.” “There is really no such thing as a problem that can’t be solved.” “I should be able to organize everything in advance.” These are statements drawn from the “Intolerance of Uncertainty” and “Tolerance for Ambiguity” tests, classic assessments that have been attracting new attention as tools for unlocking the upsides of not-knowing. (Ambiguity, the state of being inexact or open to multiple interpretations, is a source of uncertainty.) In essence, the tests measure the degree to which people view being unsure as a challenge or as a threat, a distinction that affects how well we learn, argue, explore, invent, and solve problems.

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Those who shun the indefinite tend to see the world in shades of black and white, ignoring the gray. They are prone to jump to answers and are distressed by chaos and surprise. Their “cognitive map” is narrowed to “rigidly defined tracks,” wrote Frenkel-Brunswik. In contrast, people who operate on the other side of the scale are more likely to be curious, flexible thinkers who revel in complex problems and in new experiences from living abroad to trying a new delicacy. They may even be in better charge of their minds; evidence suggests that such thinkers have more gray matter (i.e., neural volume) in brain regions related to executive control.

In the study of the mind, a tolerance is a tendency, not a fate. We are all more or less prone to be introverted or outgoing, impulsive or reflective, and to welcome the opportunity of incertitude or not. A refusal to not-know isn’t a guaranteed mark of fascism or bigotry any more than someone who dislikes parties is automatically a full-on recluse. (And while political conservatives are a little more reluctant to embrace uncertainty, the well-publicized link between these two complex concepts is weak; many liberals detest surprises, and no small number of conservatives revel in change.)

We all have a personal appetite for not-knowing, but the real news is that this leaning is malleable. Situation and context matter; under time pressure, almost everyone’s eagerness to race to a conclusion deepens. At the same time, through practice and a bit of effort, we can bolster our capacity for lingering in the gray spaces where cognitive treasures abound. It is possible to move the dial.

Picture a laboratory experiment that brought together pairs of strangers with opposing political views for a brief online back-and-forth on a controversial topic such as abortion or gun control. The interactions that unfolded in the 2016 study were just the kind that so often go quickly awry. This is the moment when the cognitive mismatch that confronts us isn’t a mystery virus or a trade policy shift but another person with a wholly different view, an opponent we say. The potential for “conflict processing” awaits.

At the outset, half of the pairs were coached to take on a highly competitive, point-scoring mindset. The other duos were told to cooperatively learn as much as they could from one another. In fifteen minutes, this slight difference in stance shifted the participants’ approach to the world. The pairs of

In contrast, those who had been primed to learn became more evaluative. They began to see knowing as inherently uncertain and as something best forged from multiple viewpoints. “I can absolutely see that point,” said one participant. They were no less confident in their views; contrary to what we might expect, having the courage to tolerate ambiguity is associated with assertiveness. But by being open to new, challenging information, they grew willing to examine and modify their position. They treated their understanding as akin to an evolving yet durable tapestry, its strength deriving from its very suppleness and mutability. From such a vantage point, more skillful and persuasive arguments are made.

No one seminar or script can transform us into virtuosos of not-knowing. “We don’t have a home-run magic bullet for this,” a leading scientist of uncertainty chided when I pressed him for an antidote to our fear of the unknown. We can’t “inject all this, bottle it, and put it into some easy intervention,” said Paul K. J. Han, a senior physician-scientist at the National Institutes of Health. One-shot fixes are the pipe dreams of an instant-answer age, he was reminding me.

Still, neither should we ignore the myriad chances that await us each day to open our minds to uncertainty—and to its remarkable potential. 🌀

This essay is excerpted with permission from Maggie Jackson’s new book Uncertain: The Wisdom and Wonder of Being Unsure, published this month by Prometheus Books.

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Maggie Jackson

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Maggie Jackson is an award-winning author and journalist known for her prescient writings on social trends, particularly technology’s impact on humanity. Her newest book, Uncertain: The Wisdom and Wonder of Being Unsure, was nominated for a National Book Award. Her previous book Distracted: Reclaiming Our Focus in a World of Lost Attention sparked a global conversation on the steep costs of our tech-centric, attention-deficient modern lives. Learn more at her website.



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