BRIEF: EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE TO MANAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF CHANGE AND UNCERTAINTY

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Overview

Coping with uncertainty and change have been key features of the COVID-19 pandemic. Young people have had to continually adjust and readjust their lifestyles and behaviour in response to changing risks and challenges posed by the virus and to updated government guidelines. People respond differently to change and uncertainty, some react positively (e.g. excitement) whilst others react negatively (e.g. worry).

It can be difficult to tolerate uncertainty and at times this can lead to distress and affect mental health. Difficulty coping with uncertainty is associated with a range of different mental health issues. These include difficulties around anxiety, (Dugas et al., 1997) mood, (Boswell et al., 2013) and eating (Brown et al., 2017) as well as obsessive-compulsive disorders (Lind et al., 2009) and post-traumatic stress (Ogelsby et al., 2016). Learning how to respond to and manage uncertainty may help to reduce some of the mental strain experienced during the pandemic.

This document has been developed in collaboration with clinicians and researchers who bring particular expertise in how to support young people to manage uncertainty. It highlights key strategies and recommendations to support young people who are struggling with uncertainty and change. This information has been written to apply in a general context, with some specific considerations made for the COVID-19 context.

Summary of the key recommendations for young people who are struggling to cope with uncertainty and change:

1. **Remember that uncertainty is normal, inevitable and does not always mean something bad will happen**
2. **Identify whether it is useful or possible to remove uncertainty**
3. **Try not to avoid uncertainty altogether, in fact look out for opportunities to experience it more (even if in small ways) in order to learn that it can be coped with**
4. **Learn how to "sit" with feelings of uncertainty, focus on the here and now and solvable problems**
5. **Look for things in life where it is possible to have control: establish plans and routines**
6. **Seek help when it is needed**

Recommendations:

1. **Remember that uncertainty is normal, inevitable and does not always mean something bad will happen**

Uncertainty is very common in everyday life. Uncertainty is unusually high at the moment. Everyone has had to adjust and readjust their behaviour continually in responses to changing risks and government guidelines. However, it is important to remember that even in non-pandemic times uncertainty is an inevitable part of daily life.

Recognise that it is normal to find all the change and uncertainty anxiety-provoking and challenging. Uncertainty makes it difficult to predict, control or plan what decisions to make and how to act. As such, uncertainty often makes people worry, feel upset, uncomfortable, confused or frustrated. It is important to recognise that this is perfectly normal. However, just because uncertainty is hard for lots of people, it doesn't mean that any one person's struggles are not valid or important or that nothing can be done.

Try to hold in mind that uncertainty doesn't mean that the worst will happen. It is common for people who experience high levels of distress from uncertainty to assume that uncertainty means something bad is likely to happen, but this is not necessarily the case.

2. **Identify whether it is useful or possible to try to get rid of or reduce the uncertainty**

Establish whether minimising uncertainty is a realistic or useful goal. In some cases, uncertainty can be reduced, for example by following government guidelines, but lots of other aspects of the pandemic/ daily life are outside of people's control. Working out whether something is in or out of a person's control can be a helpful first step.

Recognise that there are going to be situations in life that are uncertain or that cannot be resolved. Lots of things that are changing during the pandemic are out of *most people's* control, for example, whether schools are open as usual or whether people are allowed to go out or see friends. Things are uncertain at the moment (and in general), so work on being okay with that uncertainty where there is nothing you can do about it (and recognise that being able to do this is a great life skill to have).

3. **Try not to avoid uncertainty altogether, in fact look out for opportunities to experience it more (even if in small ways) in order to learn that it can be coped with**

It is common to want to avoid difficult feelings, but to be able to manage them better we need opportunities to experience them and to test out our predictions about what will happen. For example, when people struggle with uncertainty, they often think they won't be able to cope with these feelings. But by avoiding them we don't get to find out whether we can in fact cope and what helps us to do so. Look out for opportunities to put predictions to the test in manageable ways. Try to notice what actually happened and how that compared to

what was predicted. What was discovered about what actually happened, and about your ability to cope? For example, were there ways of coping that did work? Did anything unexpected happen (and were there any positives to uncertainty)?

Everyone is different, and it is important to try out uncertainty at your own pace. For example, it could be trying a new food, choosing to watch a different genre of film to ones usually watched. Pushing the boundaries in this way can help people to realise how capable they are of dealing with uncertainty, as well as demonstrating how uncertainty does not always lead to a bad outcome (and can sometimes lead to good things or be exciting).

Watch out for things that you might do which might seem to help in the short term, but make uncertainty feel worse in the long run and lead to more worry. For example, this may include: spending a lot of time talking about worries, checking a lot for news updates, looking at social media, being inside your head a lot thinking about things or asking for a lot of reassurance. These strategies (often aimed at trying to increase certainty) can create a vicious cycle where they actually lead to more worry and uncertainty. Rather than trying to control the uncertainty, it can be helpful to not engage with the worries or do things to try to increase certainty and instead, focus on doing other activities that occupy you, that you enjoy or that give you a sense of achievement or purpose (see below).

4. **Learn how to "sit" with feelings of uncertainty**

When uncertainty causes distress or uneasiness it can be helpful to develop the ability to "sit" with the feeling of uncertainty - to accept it rather than fight against it. This is about getting used to how uncertainty feels. At first, uncertainty will probably feel uneasy or uncomfortable. However, recognising that these uncomfortable feelings are a reaction to the uncertainty can help reduce feelings of distress.

Pay more attention to what is happening right now. During the pandemic (and more generally), it is easy to worry about the future. The mind can wander into 'what if' scenarios about the future (e.g., *what if my exams are cancelled, what if I can't see my friends on my birthday?*). When the mind drifts into these 'what if' scenarios or thinking too much about the future, it is important to recognise that thoughts may come and go and then to re-focus on what is happening right now. It can be helpful to fully engage in an activity that brings pleasure or a sense of satisfaction, for example exercising (e.g., go for a walk, cycle, take part in an online exercise class), reading, watching a film/TV show, online gaming, listening to music, doing something creative (e.g., draw), talking to friend/family member, having a bath, or cooking. Or at night time, try doing a quiet activity, for example reading a fiction book. It can also be helpful to keep a notepad by the bed to note down any worries which come up at night-time, in order to revisit these worries during the day during a set 'worry time' (see below).

Make a regular time and place to talk through worries or concerns. Making a dedicated 'worry time' can be helpful for managing uncertainty and worry more generally. This means having a set time each day (ideally well before bedtime) to sit down for a time limited amount of time (maximum 30 minutes) to talk or think through any worries with a clear focus

on coming up with possible solutions and a plan. If a worry comes up at another time, instead of engaging in it further, make a note of it and 'park it' until the next 'worry time'.

5. **Look for opportunities to take control: establish plans and routines**

Look out for things in life which are more certain or can be controlled. Although lots of things can't be controlled (e.g., whether learning will take place at school or online), it can help to think about what *can* be controlled (e.g., setting a daily routine, doing homework, revising, making a playlist, connecting with friends in other ways). Try to notice what is still the same (rather than focusing on what is different/uncontrollable).

Maintain or create new routines. Some certainty can also come from maintaining routines. Where it is possible to do so, try to follow normal routines- for example, in relation to eating, sleeping, studying and playing or downtime. Certainty can also come from creating new routines where the pandemic has taken away 'normality'. Setting attainable goals that are focused on personal values (e.g. being active, spending time with others) that can be integrated into a new routine can help make this easier to do.

Make a plan. Where worries relate to real life problems, it can be helpful to problem-solve possible solutions and create a plan of action for them. For example, creating a revision timetable to help manage exam worries.

6. **Seek help when it is needed.**

This briefing has identified specific ways to manage change and uncertainty. If difficulties managing uncertainty are causing distress and/or interfering in daily life, it is important to seek help. Just because uncertainty is hard for lots of people, it doesn't mean that any single person's struggles aren't valid or important. If anyone is struggling at a level where it is getting in the way of daily life (e.g., causing distress, interfering with sleep, schoolwork, concentrating in lessons, socialising with friends), it is important to seek help. This could be talking to a trusted friend or family member. Often a good starting point is to speak to someone at school (a school nurse, school mental health champion); this information can typically be found on the school website or by asking a form tutor. Another option is to speak to a health professional, e.g., GP.

More information on sources of support (and other useful resources) can be found here: https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/youth-mental-health/

Key References:

- **The Conversation piece – Jayne Morriss** https://theconversation.com/learning-to-cope-with-uncertainty-during-covid-19-151420

This article discusses suggestions from mental health professionals about how to cope with uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has created uncertainty in many aspects of daily life. Intolerance of uncertainty (when uncertainty leads to high levels of distress) is thought to play a key role in people's mental health and is associated with many different mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, mood, post-traumatic stress, eating and obsessive-compulsive disorders). Managing uncertainty is therefore important in order to reduce potential distress. Steps which can help individuals to cope with anxiety include: firstly, recognising that uncertainty is an inevitable part of life, so taking time to acknowledge how this makes them feel; secondly, think about whether minimising uncertainty is a realistic goal, as sometimes things will be outside of someone's control; finally, expanding their comfort zone at a pace they are comfortable with (therefore challenging their intolerance of uncertainty), for example, ordering food from a new restaurant or watching a new film.

- **Wahlund, T., Andersson, E., Jolstedt, M., Perrin, S., Vigerland, S., & Serlachius, E. (2020). Intolerance of uncertainty–focused treatment for adolescents with excessive worry: A pilot feasibility study.** *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, *27*(2), 215-230. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2019.06.002

This is a study which explores the use cognitive behavioural therapy for intolerance of uncertainty in adolescents. Twelve 13–17-year-olds with excessive worry (intolerance of uncertainty is highly associated with worry) were provided with weekly face-to-face sessions with a therapist. The sessions included therapist and self-guided exposure to situations involving uncertainty. There was also an internet-delivered educational program for parents, which was designed to teach parents about worry, intolerance of uncertainty and helpful parental behaviours. After the therapy sessions, the young people reported significant decreases in self-reported worry, anxiety, depression, intolerance of uncertainty and parent-reported worry. Clinicians also rated over half of the young people as much or very much improved posttreatment, an improvement which was maintained at 3 months follow-up. Young people and their parents also reported being satisfied with the treatment. This study is important, because it suggests that exposure to thoughts and situations involving uncertainty is an important component of treatments for excessive worry in young people and also that internet delivered components of intervention (with little therapist input) can be helpful for parents.

- **The British Psychological Society- Managing Uncertainty in Children and Young People: Advice for parents during the Covid-19 pandemic** https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Managing%20Uncertainty%20in%20children%20and%20young%20people%20-%20advice%20for%20parents%20during%20Covid-19.pdf

This online guide provides advice for parents about what can help with children's anxiety. The main points of the guide are: it is important to manage the information children are getting; even young children will be affected by changes during the pandemic (changes to their routine etc.) so it is important to talk to them about the pandemic in age appropriate ways; sharing *a little bit* about your feelings can be helpful in showing them that it is okay to feel this way and that it is good to talk about how you feel; reminding your child regularly that it is okay to talk about feelings and showing them how to do this e.g. 'I felt really happy today because…' and having a structure and routine at home. The guide also provides advice for parents on making decisions when they themselves are feeling stressed and uncertain.

- **Dugas & Robichaud (2007). Cognitive-behavioural treatment for generalized anxiety disorder: From science to practice. New York: Routledge.**

This book provides information on the causes, assessment and treatment of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) in adults. This includes a review of the evidence for different models which explain the development and maintenance of GAD, as well descriptions of the assessment and step-by-step treatment of GAD, data on the effectiveness of individual and group therapy, and information on follow-up treatment strategies.

- **Payne, S., Bolton, D., & Perrin, S. (2011). A pilot investigation of cognitive therapy for generalized anxiety disorder in children aged 7–17 years. Cognitive Therapy and Research, 35(2), 171-178. DOI:** 10.1007/s10608-010-9341-z

Payne et al. (2011) is a study which evaluates the effect of a cognitive treatment for diagnosed Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) in sixteen 7–17-year-olds. The young people were provided with between 5 to 15 cognitive therapy sessions targeted at their tolerance for uncertainty, beliefs about worry, negative problem orientation and cognitive avoidance strategies. This included worry awareness training, planned exposure to uncertainty, modification of dysfunctional beliefs about worry, modified problem-solving training, imaginal exposure to unpleasant images or worries and relapse prevention. All but one of the young people improved after treatment, with 13 young people no longer meeting the criteria for a diagnosis of GAD. The findings of this study suggest that developmentally-adjusted cognitive treatment can successfully reduce GAD in children and adolescents.

- **Robichaud, M., & Dugas, M. J. (2015). The generalized anxiety disorder workbook: a comprehensive CBT guide for coping with uncertainty, worry, and fear. New Harbinger Publications.**

This workbook provides evidence-based exercises and strategies to help individuals with Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD). The exercises and strategies are based in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and targets the fear of uncertainty, which is often the cause of worry in GAD. This workbook provides strategies for individuals to stop seeing uncertainty as threatening, which in turn reduces anxiety.

- **Osmanağaoğlu, N., Creswell, C., & Dodd, H. F. (2018). Intolerance of Uncertainty, anxiety, and worry in children and adolescents: A meta-analysis.** *Journal of affective disorders*, *225*, 80-90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.07.035

This is a review and analysis of 31 papers published about intolerance of uncertainty with regard to the development and maintenance of anxiety and worry in children and adolescents. Results suggested that there is a strong association between intolerance of uncertainty and both anxiety and worry in young people. Therefore, intolerance of uncertainty may be a relevant area to focus on in future anxiety/ worry interventions. However, it should be noted that studies provided limited longitudinal data and did not include samples of young people with a range of different anxiety disorders.

- **Perrin, S., Bevan, D., Payne, S., & Bolton, D. (2019). GAD-specific cognitive behavioral treatment for children and adolescents: A pilot randomized controlled trial.** *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, *43*(6), 1051-1064. DOI: 10.1007/s10608-019-10020-3

Perrin et al. (2019) is a study which examines the use of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)to treat Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) for children and adolescents. Young people aged 10-18 received either 10 weeks of individual CBT or supported waitlist (i.e. no CBT). The therapy included aspects designed to increase tolerance for uncertainty, for example planned exposure to uncertainty, such as raising your hand in class when you are not completely certain of the answer, with the aim of reducing feelings of fear in the event of a possible but unlikely feared outcome. Whether the young

people were assessed as having a diagnosis of GAD or not immediately post-treatment and at 3 months follow up was assessed. 80% of individuals who received CBT were considered in remission from GAD post-treatment (compared to 0% in the waitlist condition) and this remained the same at 3-month follow up. This suggests that GAD-specific CBT treatments are acceptable to children as young as 7 years and adolescents up to 19 years, resulting in high rates of remission from GAD. The findings also suggest that intolerance of uncertainty is associated with severity of worry, anxiety and GAD in youth, and are therefore potential targets for future interventions to reduce anxiety in young people.

- **Fialko, L., Bolton, D., & Perrin, S. (2012). Applicability of a cognitive model of worry to children and adolescents.** *Behaviour research and therapy*, *50*(5), 341-349. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2012.02.003

Fialko et al. (2012) is a study which explores whether intolerance of anxiety, cognitive avoidance and positive beliefs are related to children and adolescent's anxiety and worry. In the study, 515 7–19-year-olds completed self-report measures relating to worry, anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty. Results suggested that intolerance of uncertainty was directly related to worry and anxiety in both children and adolescents. This finding suggests that intolerance of uncertainty might be an important target of effective treatments for child and adolescent anxiety.

- **Dugas, M.J., Laugesen, N. & Bukowski, W.M. Intolerance of Uncertainty, Fear of Anxiety, and Adolescent Worry. J Abnorm Child Psychol 40, 863–870 (2012).** https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.07.035

This is a longitudinal study which collected data from 338 adolescents, in order to assess the association between intolerance of uncertainty and fear of anxiety with worry. The adolescents completed self-report measures of worry, intolerance of uncertainty and fear of anxiety twice a year for five years. Analyses of the measures found a reciprocal relationship between uncertainty and worry, in which change in one variable partially explained change in the other. Intolerance of uncertainty is thought to lead to worry in adolescents due to those with a high intolerance of uncertainty being more likely to interpret ambiguous information as threatening and engage in avoidance behaviours. Worry is likely to lead to intolerance of uncertainty in adolescents due to those who worry concluding that a feared outcome did not occur *because* they worried about it beforehand. Therefore, young people who use worry to achieve 'certainty' might become less tolerant of uncertainty overtime, because worry has interfered with the re-evaluation of the dangerousness of uncertainty-inducing situations. Fear of anxiety and worry also showed a reciprocal relationship, however, change in fear of anxiety had a much weaker effect on change in worry than vice versa. These findings suggest that intolerance of uncertainty may play a greater role in the cause of worry in adolescents than fear of anxiety.

General guidelines for developing resources to support young people:

<u>Content</u>

- Keep the tone **informal, conversational** and **direct**
- Content needs to be **accessible**, so not too academic or long
- Include **authentic youth voice** – incorporate young people's experiences and real-life stories
- Include **practical** and **tangible** advice
- Include onward **signposting** from reliable sources

<u>Format</u>

- Video resources should be a) **short and snappy**, and b) on topics that can be shared on social media
- Written resources should be **600-800 words maximum** with headers and sub headers to **break up the text** into theme
- Consider having **social media** content prepared to share alongside any resources that sit on specific websites as an effective way to steer young people towards the resources
- Resource needs to reach young people through **existing networks**