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TransformED NI:
Transforming Teaching and Learning



Helping students navigate change:

Coping with uncertainty



HELPING STUDENTS NAVIGATE CHANGE

By InnerDrive



'Change is the only constant' is an idea dating back to Ancient Greece. It is as true now as it was then. Whether they are starting at a new school, moving into a new year group, preparing for exams or making the transition to further education, students regularly face periods of uncertainty. These changes can bring instability, which makes it harder for students to concentrate and learn.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Research suggests that uncertainty can be even more stressful than a guaranteed negative outcome (de Berker et al., 2016). In the study, participants played a computer game in which turning over a rock could reveal a snake, resulting in a painful electric shock. While some participants knew exactly when they would receive a shock, others only knew there was a 50% chance.

Surprisingly, those facing uncertainty showed higher levels of stress than those who knew they would definitely receive the shock. One explanation is that uncertainty makes it difficult for us to prepare psychologically for what lies ahead. When the outcome is unknown, our brains remain on high alert, continually anticipating what might happen next.

For students, this helps explain why transitions, such as moving into a new year group or preparing for exams can feel particularly overwhelming. Often, it is not the change itself that causes the greatest stress, but the uncertainty surrounding it.

THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

Stress is a natural response to challenging or uncertain situations. In small doses, it can be motivating. However, when stress becomes prolonged or overwhelming, it can have a negative impact on both physical and mental wellbeing.



Evidence suggests that stress can reduce students' motivation and in turn, their academic achievement (Pascoe et al., 2019). During periods of uncertainty, students may become so focused on worrying about the outcome, resulting in them having fewer mental resources available for their learning.

Research also shows that cognitive interference caused by stress is strongly associated with poorer memory and slower information processing (Stawski et al., 2006). As stress increases, students may find it harder to concentrate, retain new information and retrieve previously learned material. This helps explain why students can sometimes perform below their true ability during periods of change.

UNCERTAINTY AND TEST ANXIETY

Periods of uncertainty are particularly evident in the lead-up to high-stakes exams. While a moderate level of stress can motivate students to prepare more and try harder, excessive anxiety can become debilitating.

Research suggests that one of the key drivers of test anxiety is when students struggle to see the connection between their actions (such as revision and preparation) and their eventual exam performance (Putwain & Pescod, 2018). This uncertainty can undermine confidence and lead students to anticipate failure, even when they are well prepared.

Fortunately, research also suggests that test anxiety can be reduced through targeted interventions. Effective programmes typically help students to:

- Recognise the signs and triggers of anxiety
- Challenge unhelpful self-talk
- Use relaxation techniques, such as slow, deep breathing
- Develop effective revision and exam strategies such as Retrieval Practice
- Set realistic, achievable goals
- Reflect on which coping strategies work best for them

Together, these approaches help shift their attention away from worrying about outcomes and towards the actions they can control. By strengthening students' sense of control and confidence, teachers can help reduce the uncertainty that often lies at the heart of test anxiety.

MANAGING UNCERTAINTY AND STRESS

According to the Mental Health Foundation (2022), one effective way to manage uncertainty is to draw on previous experiences. Reflecting on similar situations can remind students that they have successfully coped with challenges before, allowing them to reuse effective coping strategies or adapt them to new circumstances.

A helpful question to ask them is 'How is this situation similar to something you have experienced before?'. Identifying familiar elements can reduce ambiguity and make uncertain situations feel more predictable and manageable.

Rather than focusing on outcomes that cannot be guaranteed, students should direct their attention towards the aspects they can control, such as their preparation, effort and decision making. Focusing on the process, rather than the outcome, helps build confidence in their ability to cope. Over time, this can reduce the stress associated with uncertainty and help students approach new challenges with greater confidence and resilience. By helping students focus on what they can control, teachers can make periods of uncertainty feel less overwhelming and more like opportunities for growth.

Likewise, research suggests that seeking relevant information can reduce ambiguity, helping students better understand their situation and make more informed decisions (Woodward & Hendry, 2004). Indeed, other researchers have found that encouraging students to ask for help is very effective, with evidence highlighting that doing so is associated with higher grades (Sebesta & Speth, 2017). A key part of this is helping students understand that asking for support is a sign of strength, not weakness. Students who are willing to ask for help are often better able to develop effective coping strategies by learning from the experiences of others.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Change is an unavoidable part of education, but uncertainty does not have to become a barrier to learning. By understanding why periods of change can trigger stress and anxiety, teachers are better placed to support students through them. Whether it is reducing uncertainty, encouraging effective coping strategies or helping students focus on what they can control, small changes in practice can make unfamiliar situations feel more manageable.

Ultimately, helping students navigate change is not about eliminating uncertainty altogether; it is about equipping them with the confidence, resilience and strategies to thrive despite it.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES: BLOGS & VIDEOS

- 8 ways to better cope with change innerdrive.co.uk/blog/cope-with-change/
- 6 ways to reduce stress innerdrive.co.uk/blog/reduce-stress/
- 6 ways to conquer self-doubt innerdrive.co.uk/blog/conquer-self-doubt/
- Podcast: 10. Sense of Belonging with Jon Hutchinson – The Science of Learning – [Apple Podcasts](#) / [Spotify Podcasts](#)



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