

Tolerating the Anxiety of Uncertainty

(Adapted from Needing to Know for Sure: A CBT-Based Guide to Overcoming Compulsive Checking and Reassurance Seeking by Martin N Seif & Sally M Winston)

Anxiety can lead to repeatedly seek reassurance in the quest for certainty e.g. checking online, asking friends and family, trying to reassure yourself. This can often be unproductive (when no one can know for sure anyway) and keep you unhelpfully focused on your anxiety.

Using the DEAF acronym is a different way of managing anxiety by learning to tolerate the discomfort of uncertainty without taking action to reassure yourself. Through using the DEAF practice you can remind yourself that anxious thoughts are false alarms and just thoughts not facts.

Distinguish – Embrace – Avoid – Float

Distinguish your anxiety's need for reassurance from a real emergency

(You can't be absolutely sure, but a sense of urgency and desire to act right away, repetitive thought loops, 'what ifs' or a feeling that you might be catastrophising might be hints that you're in a reassurance trap)

Embrace the feeling of uncertainty

(This means recognising that the particular thing you're anxious about right now isn't the issue – tolerating uncertainty is and you can bear it, even if it's uncomfortable)

Avoid seeking reassurance

(All you need to do here is nothing, instead of your usual reassurance-seeking behaviour. Letting your brain sit with uncertainty rather than seeking the short-term relief of reassurance will train it to be more patient and mindful with difficult feelings)

Float above discomfort and let time pass

(imagine yourself as a cork floating on the waves of your feelings, or your thoughts as leaves on a stream or clouds in the sky drifting past. Given time your feelings of discomfort will subside without you having to do anything, just ride it out or watch them pass by)

You can practice DEAF whenever anxieties linked to uncertainty come up or you intentionally build the habit by thinking of or writing down a situation that would make you anxious and working through DEAF.