

# Unexpected Uncertainty: Reason behind Making Change in Behaviour of People

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## Introduction

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, people all across the world changed their buying habits substantially.

As a result of the new uncertainty, customers began storing up on essential household supplies, like toilet paper, to prepare for the unexpected. This shopping frenzy resulted in shortages, despite the fact that there would have been plenty to go around if people had simply bought what they needed. Reactive behaviour like this isn't unique, according to a study performed by UNSW Sydney, but it is a frequent method to deal with unexpected uncertainty.

Unexpected uncertainty, in fact, is such a potent motivator for change that it frequently causes us to alter our behaviour, even when it is harmful to us. When people are confronted with an unexpected change in their surroundings, they seek out strategies to reduce their anxiety," explains Dr. Walker. "They can try to recover some sense of control by changing their behaviour and decision-making strategies." Surprisingly, our research discovered that unexpected uncertainty prompted people to change their behaviour even when they would have been better off sticking to a tried and true technique" [1].

The behavioural research, which was just published in *The Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, is the first to indicate that the sort of uncertainty we encounter – whether expected or unexpected – influences our response. A city worker who knows their morning commute takes anything from 30 to 50 minutes, for example, would not be astonished if it took 50 minutes. A country driver, on the other hand, would be startled if their 30-minute trip suddenly took 50 minutes.

To see how people react to unanticipated change, the researchers had study participants sell a pair of products in a virtual simulation to one of two subjects in this case, aliens. Their mission was straightforward: collect as many points (or 'alien money') as they could. Participants had to choose which extraterrestrial they wanted to sell a pair of chemicals to, but only one of the substances dictated how much the alien would be willing to pay. They had to figure out which chemical and extraterrestrial combination would yield the best results. An initial group of 35 people were trained on the assignment and immediately discovered that one technique (for example, Option A) provided a greater offer of 15 points. However, the reward pattern altered halfway through the experiment, and Option A now rewarded a random value between 8 and 22 points. The participants began seeking for alternative approaches to complete the assignment as soon as we added an element of uncertainty," explains Dr. Walker. "The kicker is that in every case, their best option was to revert to their old method.

The epidemic, according to Dr. Walker, is a large-scale example of unforeseen uncertainty, as are our many responses to it.

"At the start of COVID-19, everything changed quite abruptly," he adds. Many of us were working from home at the same time, changing how we shopped and socialized." The norms we used to live by no longer applied, and there were – and still are – no clear explanation as to when or how the pandemic will stop. People used a variety of methods, including panic shopping, to alleviate the new uncertainties and return to 'normalcy.' However, as we've seen, not all of these reactive methods were successful over time.

## Boiling Frog Syndrome

Unexpected uncertainty elicited dramatic responses, whereas predicted uncertainty elicited the opposite response.

During the trial's second phase, the researchers gradually introduced uncertainty to a new group of 35 participants. The customary 15 points for Option A were reduced to 14-16 points, then 13-17 points, until the level of uncertainty reached 8-22 points. Even though the amount of uncertainty eventually reached the same levels as in the first trial, Dr Walker says, "the participants' behaviour did not change appreciably. People were able to keep their former strategies when uncertainty was introduced gradually. While the original technique was intended to be the most beneficial in this experiment, Dr. Walker claims that other research has revealed the dangers of not modifying behaviour when faced with slow change.

Dr. Walker says, "We can see this pattern in a lot of real-world situations, like the climate change crisis. There is no sudden urge to modify our behaviour when change is sluggish and barely perceptible; therefore we stick to previous behaviours. Trying to encourage people to act on climate change is a lot like the parable of the boiling frog. If you place a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will not realize the danger because the water will gradually warm. It's too late to jump out when it finally notices. Professor Newell believes that applying discoveries about how people react to uncertainty in the lab to engaging people in climate action is a crucial next step in this research.

"If we can identify the triggers for exploring new options, we might be able to overcome the lethargy that comes with creating new, long-term behaviours. [2]

Being sure about Uncertainty. Uncertainty is something humans face every day, whether it's how bad traffic will be or what questions might be asked in an exam.

But the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a new layer of uncertainty to major areas of our lives, like career, health, and living circumstances. While this study isn't the whole picture for human behaviour during the pandemic, it can help explain why so many people looked for new ways to add certainty to their lives, says Dr Walker. Dr. Walker's current study focuses on psychiatric epidemiology, and he's excited to see where this field goes in the future, particularly in terms of forecasting individual responses to uncertainty.

Given how many decisions we make in our daily lives under uncertainty, Dr. Walker says, the more we can understand about how these judgments are made, the more we hope to empower individuals to make good decisions [3].

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