

Intolerance of Uncertainty



People who find it especially hard to cope with the unexpected or unknown are said to have an **intolerance of uncertainty**, also referred to as **IU**. Neurodivergent people often report a preference for certainty and experience levels of anxiety that can interfere with their daily life. Understanding more about the links between IU and anxiety can lead to more effective strategies and supports.

Key characteristics

- **Discomfort with the unknown**—Experiencing lack of information or plans as stressful and to be avoided
- **Tendency to worry**—Excessive worrying or catastrophizing (i.e., seeing only the worst possible outcomes of a situation)
- **Desire for predictability**—A strong desire for predictability and control, viewing uncertainty as a threat
- **Avoidance behaviours**—Avoiding situations, people or tasks that involve uncertainty or ambiguity
- **Need for certainty**—Seeking reassurance, guarantees or concrete plans to reduce anxiety about the unknown
- **Emotional distress**—Experiencing heightened anxiety, depression and other kinds of distress

Examples of behaviours associated with intolerance of uncertainty

- **Double-checking**—Repeatedly asking the same questions; checking emails, texts or phone apps; or reviewing tasks to ensure that they are perfect
- **Need for control**—Not allowing others to take on responsibilities because they fear that others will not meet them correctly; wanting to do things a certain way or insisting on being paired with certain peers for tasks
- **Procrastinating or avoiding**—Putting off tasks or avoiding new or unfamiliar situations, which can look like school refusal, feigning illness, not handing in permission slips, avoiding school clubs or events despite interest, and so on
- **Distraction**—Keeping busy or off-task to avoid thinking about uncertain situations
- **Seeking reassurance**—Constantly asking for confirmation or validation from others
- **Overplanning**—Creating detailed plans and contingencies to control potential outcomes
- **Worrying**—Spending excessive amounts of time worrying about potential negative outcomes



Strategies to support students who have an intolerance of uncertainty

⚙️ Provide information up front to increase students' ability to predict events and outcomes whenever possible.

⚙️ Provide clear daily schedules and deadlines, frontloading for daily transitions.

⚙️ Frontload students if something out of the ordinary is planned and help them to prepare for it.

⚙️ Develop a coping plan for unexpected events (e.g., a fire drill, a substitute teacher) that students can keep at their desks. The plan may include pausing for slow, deep breathing; sitting next to a chosen buddy (who knows the plan); or referring to a summary of the students' needs and daily routines.

⚙️ Provide checklists and other visual reminders for tasks and upcoming events.

⚙️ Provide social stories or visuals to help students understand what to expect and what their options are during upcoming events or scenarios.

⚙️ Plan transition visits or view websites or videos, when possible, so students know what to expect when attending new schools, sporting events, field trips or special events like proms, graduation or other ceremonies.