Uncertainty as a Sanctuary of Possibility

**Dr. Buczynski:** How can we help clients view uncertainty not as a place of fear, but a space of possibility?

Dan Siegel developed a practice that helps people deal with the most difficult questions of the unknown. And he shares how it allowed one boy to see beyond his own mortality.

**Dr. Siegel:** The question of how we help people with uncertainty is so important today.

There’s a term that is being used in a range of professions called VUCA, which is that we now live in a VUCA world, and VUCA stands for volatile (meaning rapid change) uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

With these new VUCA conditions that are pervasive on the planet, mental health professionals will be deeply confronted with your question about how we help people with uncertainty.

In short, how do we deal with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity – that’s the VUCA question.

Let’s fit them all in and talk about a couple of different layers.

From an interpersonal neurobiology point of view, ironically, we see uncertainty as the friend in psychotherapy – a friend that needs to be befriended. Let me give you a reason for that in a moment.

From a brain point of view, we actually see that there’s a very ancient — probably 300 million year old vertically distributed circuit between the brainstem, the limbic area, and the cortex that I like to call the checker circuit.

The checker circuit checks uncertain situations for danger.

When you bring up the question of uncertainty, I’m always thinking about the checker, because the checker’s job is to make sure that there’s certainty, as much as you can guarantee it, of survival.

So, asking about uncertainty is a deep, deep question.

When my checker system, this aspect of me, has 300 million years of history, and if I’m 50 years old, I’ve got 50 years on the planet, and there’s no contest. You can tell me, if you’re my therapist, “Embrace uncertainty.”

My checker says, “No way. I’ve taken care of every one of your ancestors, and you’re not going to mess with me, little Danny. Get your act together. I’m going to drive you into...” as one of my young patients called it, “Overactive Checker Deployment,” which she called OCD.
In chapter 12 of the Mindsight book, there’s a whole discussion about her experience dealing with uncertainty and dealing with the checker.

In many ways, the experience of uncertainty comes from the fact that we can make representations of time.

We know there is a future coming, and we know what the past was—we have expectations built on what was from the past, which create what are called top-down filters in the present.

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Uncertainty is a threat to safety—the whole system of past, present, and future is that we’re supposed to learn from the past, be very awake in the present, and make sure we can control the future... and life isn’t like that!

But to do that is our natural drive.

This takes us to some of the deepest existential issues in interpersonal neurobiology—we have nine domains of integration. One of those domains is called the temporal domain, and it includes dealing with uncertainty.

What does dealing with uncertainty mean? It means that I have to embrace the reality that I can’t control everything.

If you talk to any recovering alcoholic, they say that’s like the first set of steps in Alcoholics Anonymous: I can’t be in control of everything. I have to let go and let God... whether you believe in God as a force or believe in God as the generation of diversity... You have to deal with the diversity of everything – You have to realize that you’re not in control.

Your mind is a mind of its own and finding a way to live at peace with that is important.

So, that’s one aspect of uncertainty—you can’t control everything.

There’s also the idea that nothing lasts forever. Having a map of time means we have the uncertainty of what death will mean, and that’s a huge issue—you just don’t want things to end.

I wrote a chapter with my daughter in a two-volume set by Ellen Langer and other co-editors called the Handbook of Mindfulness. It was really fun to write this chapter, “Thriving with Uncertainty” with my daughter since she is part of the next generation...

The chapter is a step-by-step discussion of the science of uncertainty, and it proposes that the mind is an emergent property of energy flow... In another book, Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human, I talk about uncertainty, and actually, it’s a 333 page response to your question!
What you see is that energy, according to quantum physics, is described as a probability curve.

A 100% probability would be like saying ...“Those flowers are Alstroemeria.” I said it and that’s certain.

Now, you don’t know what I’m going to say next. There are 10 billion things I could say, and for you to guess correctly what I’m going to say would be near zero – this is the range that’s called the probability distribution curve.

I’ve done this study now of 10,000 subjects on what we call the wheel of awareness where it distinguishes the knowing of consciousness at the hub of the wheel, the metaphoric wheel, from the knowns of the rim.

We’ve applied a quantum physics analysis to the responses that these people have given and then have presented to quantum physicists some really exciting possibilities that are arising.

One of these possibilities is that the experience of consciousness arises from a sea of potential – the energy curve is in this kind of plane of possibility.

As that curve arises up, you go from the knowing of consciousness to moods and intentions which are plateaus, to sub-peak values of thinking and in the peak of thought, emoting as a sub-peak value all the way to a peak of an emotion, and then remembering, a sub-peak value, all the way to a peak of a memory.

In this perspective, we find continuity between cognition and consciousness and even our connections with each other.

From this very brief overview of that, we find that many people are frightened of uncertainty – they avoid this open source of consciousness.

We’ve found it very helpful to help people develop this wheel of awareness practice where they learn to trust the expansive, infinite sense of the hub, which is this plane of possibility correlate, and when they do, it’s often in the face of initially feeling terrified.

Some people say, “There’s nothing there – it’s complete emptiness – it’s horribly dark,” but then as they move through the practice, the same place – where nothing is certain – becomes a sanctuary of possibility. I’ll tell you one story about a 12 year old boy who was dealing with this. (I think I also talk about him in the Mindsight book.)

His uncle died, and he was terrified about what was going to happen when he would die. He was frightened his relatives would die. Death was the uncertainty that he was dealing with. There are so many other uncertainties that we have, but this was his.

I did some mindfulness practices with him, and he reached this deep place of the hub, or basically, the equivalent. I think we were doing a breath practice, but it gets you to the same plane of possibility.
His mother was in the room, and he comes to this deep place and there’s this kind of beatific sense on his face – he looked really peaceful – he smiled and said, “Oh, my god.”

“His mother and I just watch… and he said, “I think I get it. I’ve never felt so peaceful before in my life. I don’t have to control everything, and I came to realize this in a kind of vision… If I can be connected to other people, then even after I die, I won’t disappear.”

His mother and I both started to cry… I don’t know how to tell you this, but from a quantum view, I think people try to avoid that spaciousness.

They cling on to an idea of a separate self that needs to be in control of everything, needs to think things are certain… You have a body that you equate with the self.

Part of the problem is that the self is much bigger than the body. The node of the body is just a node where the system is the interconnection of all the nodes – that’s the self.

The self is really the system, and that’s what this young boy was trying to describe. In many ways, there is this clinging to certainty in the face of job uncertainty, in the face of illness, in the face of aging — my mom is getting on and we’ve talked a lot about these ideas – she keeps listening to my audio books over and over and I ask her, “What are you learning?”

She’ll say, “I’m learning to go to that plane.” Twice now she’s come to this wheel of awareness that I do at retreats. She gets it – you drop there. Even people who have been traumatized or afraid of uncertainty, when you teach them that this can be a sanctuary, not a prison, it is a whole embracing of uncertainty.

There’s a science to it, and in Ellen Langer’s book, I try to describe it with my daughter. To articulate all of this is hard, but when you look at the quantum view, it actually becomes understandable why this is flip-flopped between the emptiness of that plane of possibility – where it can feel terrifying – versus the peacefulness of the exact same place where it’s the source of all possibilities.

**Dr. Buczynski:** As Dan shared, when we let go of our need for certainty, it can open us up to many new possibilities.

Tomorrow, we’ll learn how to help a client accept their uncertainty.

But now, I’d like to hear what you think. How will you use these ideas in your work with clients? Please, leave a comment in the box right below. I’ll see you tomorrow.