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On the Experience of Awaiting Uncertain News

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Abstract

At some point in life, everyone must wait for important news—whether the news from college applications, job interviews, medical tests, academic exams, or even romantic overtures. Until recently, the psychological literature on stress and coping had largely overlooked these common and often distressing experiences. However, the past five years have seen significant advances in the understanding of waiting experiences, revealing insights into the nature, time course, and consequences of distress during waiting periods, individual differences in these experiences, and effective and ineffective strategies for coping with this type of uncertainty. This paper reviews the emerging findings from this growing literature and provides suggestions for future research in this area.

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Across the lifespan, people wait for news about their success in academic and professional pursuits, the outcomes of financial risks and opportunities, and their fate following medical tests and procedures. These waiting periods vary in their length, significance, and likely outcomes, but nearly all prompt uncomfortable levels of anxiety and its close cousin, worry (Sweeny & Falkenstein, 2015; Sweeny & Dooley, 2017). Despite decades of top-notch research on stress and coping (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1999), until recently this common and distressing experience had received almost no empirical attention beyond targeted studies of specific medical waiting periods (e.g., the wait for breast cancer diagnosis, Montgomery & McCrone, 2010).

This paper aims to provide an overview of recent insights into the dynamics of waiting experiences, including the unique qualities of waiting periods, the effects of waiting on health and well-being, and ways to ease (or exacerbate) the experience of waiting. The past five years have seen considerable expansion and advancement in this area of research, much of it guided by the *uncertainty navigation model* (Sweeny & Cavanaugh, 2012), a theoretical framework for understanding the complex landscape of distress and the coping strategies that might ameliorate it while people await uncertain news. The model highlights the toxic combination of anxiety and persistent thoughts (i.e., worry) that lies at the heart of stressful waiting periods and elucidates a set of strategies people might use to manage their distress. These strategies capture the complexity of “waiting well,” including efforts to plan for the uncertain future (proactive coping and preventive action), to reappraise the uncertainty in ways that render it more manageable (managing expectations, creating psychological distance, and preemptively identifying silver linings in feared outcomes), and to minimize the impact of one’s distress (distraction and suppression).

The remainder of this paper outlines novel insights that have emerged from research guided by this theoretical approach. Much of this work has examined the experience of law graduates awaiting their result on the bar exam, which entails a lengthy and predictable wait for personally significant news that occurs in large groups each year—thus making it an appropriate and relatively convenient target for initial investigations of the dynamics of waiting. Targeted studies of other waiting experiences complement these systematic investigations.

Waiting as a Unique Stressor

Intuition suggests that waiting uniquely combines two sources of existential discomfort: uncertainty and a lack of control. To illustrate, consider the experience of professors going up for tenure. The period prior to the tenure review can be quite stressful. However, professors have some degree of control over their fate at this point, even though their fate is uncertain; they can work late nights and seek out advantageous opportunities. Now, fast-forward to the day when some professors learn that their tenure was denied. This period is also quite stressful, and control over one's tenure decision is far in the rearview mirror; however, bad news brings with it a sense of closure and certainty that allows people to move forward with their lives. In contrast, the waiting period after professors submit their tenure package and before they learn whether their efforts were successful provides neither control nor certainty, thus producing a sense of paralysis that can be uniquely challenging. Of course, not all uncertainty is unpleasant. A professor who has secured tenure and awaits news of the concomitant salary increase would likely report little distress; in fact, the experience may even be pleasurable. People often savor uncertainty when they are confident it will result in one form or another of good news (see Wilson et al., 2005). However, many waiting periods entail the possibility of bad news at their end, and it is these experiences that are of primary interest in this paper.

In fact, research on the emotional landscape of stressful events supports both the magnitude and uniqueness of distress during unpleasant waiting periods. Regarding the magnitude of distress, several studies of the period preceding breast cancer diagnosis (i.e., the wait for mammogram or biopsy results) have documented levels of anxiety exceeding clinical thresholds for anxiety disorders in otherwise mentally healthy women (e.g., Pineault, 2007; Lampic et al., 2001). The wait for life-or-death test results is likely more distressing than the wait for academic or professional news; nonetheless, these findings point to a very high ceiling for uncertainty-related distress.

Regarding the unique profile of distress, a study of women undergoing in vitro fertilization assessed their emotional state across the waiting period prior to the pregnancy test and following test results (Boivin & Lancaster, 2010). Anxiety dominated the waiting stage, particularly in the final days before testing. In contrast, anxiety dropped precipitously following a negative pregnancy test and was replaced by other negative emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, sadness). Two subsequent studies verified this pattern of emotional experience (Sweeny & Falkenstein, 2015), and a review of the small but rich literature on diagnostic experiences in the context of breast cancer similarly concludes that anxiety is the central form of distress that arises during this acute experience of medical uncertainty (Montgomery & McCrone, 2010). Thus, if one finds anxiety to be uniquely aversive, then waiting may be uniquely challenging. If one is more sensitive to emotions like sadness and anger, then bad news likely hits harder.

Timing also matters when it comes to the distress associated with waiting, such that people report greater distress at the beginning and end of a waiting period, presumably when the uncertainty is at the front of one's mind. For example, law graduates typically report intense worry about their bar exam result in the days after the exam and in the final weeks before results

are posted online, whereas their minds are on other things and worry is relatively low in the middle of the wait (e.g., Sweeny & Andrews, 2014; Sweeny & Howell, 2017).

The research just described points to distinct consequences of waiting for emotional well-being, but is waiting also bad for one's health? Initial evidence suggests that people feel stress's ill effects (see Schneiderman, Ironson, & Siegel, 2005) even while their fate remains unclear. In another study of the wait for bar exam results, law graduates' health and sleep suffered most at the start and end of the waiting period, and they reported the worst health and sleep at times when they also reported the greatest anxiety and most intense efforts to cope with uncertainty (Howell & Sweeny, 2016). Thus, it seems that waiting gets "under the skin" and disrupts both psychological and physical well-being.

How to Wait Well

Some people face uncertainty with a positive attitude and relative calm, whereas others descend into a fog of worry and worst-case scenarios. Whether people end up in one category or the other depends on a complex blend of dispositions, social context, and intentional efforts to ease the strain of waiting.

Of course, given the frequency with which people must wait for various kinds of news, one might assume that the coping strategies needed to ease that experience are well-developed and readily applied. However, recent evidence suggests otherwise. Returning to the experience of law graduates awaiting bar exam results, these lawyers-to-be engage in a host of coping strategies while they wait—but unfortunately, no strategy seems to mitigate their anxiety or quiet their persistent, disruptive thoughts about the exam (Sweeny et al., 2016). For example, participants who said they were trying to suppress thoughts and feelings about the exam felt even worse several weeks later compared to those who did not use this strategy. Even uplifting

strategies like being hopeful and optimistic were largely ineffective, although they did not seem to backfire in the way suppression did.

These findings suggest that people are relatively unskilled at managing their thoughts and emotions while they wait for uncertain news. However, another definition of “waiting well” may be equally important: waiting in a way that improves responses to the news when it arrives. Fortunately for those who suffer in the face of uncertainty, a challenging waiting period seems to improve responses to both good and bad news (Sweeny et al., 2016). That is, people who are plagued with worry, pessimism, and persistent (if ineffective) efforts to cope also report more productive responses to bad news and more joyful responses to good news. It seems that expecting the worst sets people up to embrace, or at least gracefully handle, whatever comes their way (Sweeny, Carroll, & Shepperd, 2006), even if it is quite unpleasant during the waiting period.

Dispositional Advantages

Turning to the characteristics and strategies that mitigate distress during waiting periods, two traits seem to buffer people from the worst effects of waiting: a dispositional tendency to expect the best (i.e., high dispositional optimism) and a dispositional comfort with uncertainty (i.e., low intolerance of uncertainty; Sweeny & Andrews, 2014; Sweeny et al., 2015). Although nearly everyone finds it difficult to remain upbeat as the moment of truth draws near (Sweeny & Falkenstein, 2016), those lucky enough to have these protective characteristics generally worry less, embrace optimism, and require little effort to cope with their feelings of uncertainty. Beyond dispositional traits, recent evidence points to demographic variability in waiting experiences. Across 18 studies in a variety of contexts, self-identified women reliably reported more intense worry and greater use of coping strategies (in part because of their heightened

worry) compared to self-identified men. In contrast, men were reliably more confident than women that their wait would end with good news (Sweeny, Kwan, & Falkenstein, 2017).

Help From Others

If one's personal efforts to cope with uncertainty are ineffective, perhaps the solution is to find a shoulder to cry on. Romantic partners often serve as uniquely important sources of support (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000), and recent evidence suggests that people who are awaiting personally significant news feel better, cope better, and even sleep better when their partner is responsive to their support needs (Dooley et al., 2017). Encouragingly, this study also revealed that people perceive their partners to be most responsive to their needs during the moments when waiting tends to be hardest—that is, at the beginning and end of the wait. Of course, knowing how to be responsive to a partner's needs is no easy task (see Maisel & Gable, 2009), but several qualitative studies suggest that a wide variety of support behaviors could do the trick as long as the focus remains on the person who is waiting and not on the needs of the support provider (Dooley, Wilkinson, & Sweeny, 2017).

Successful Strategies

Despite the discouraging futility of people's naturally-occurring coping efforts (Sweeny et al., 2016), a number of strategies promise some relief for people in throes of stressful uncertainty. First, several decades of research support the benefits of lowering one's expectations at the moment of truth to brace for the worst and minimize the blow of bad news (e.g., Sweeny & Shepperd, 2010)—but when it comes to effectively managing one's expectations, timing is everything. People who embrace pessimism too early curse themselves with unnecessarily prolonged worry (Sweeny et al., 2016), and people who fail to shift toward pessimism as news approaches leave themselves vulnerable to disappointment (Krizan & Sweeny, 2013). In short,

people should assume the best as long as they can before bracing for the worst at the end of the wait.

Second, often the best way to survive a stressful waiting period is to pass the time as quickly as possible, and the best way to make time fly by is to get into a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow emerges during activities that challenge people without pushing them to the point of frustration and provide evidence of successful progress (e.g., gardening, video games; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In two studies, people who reported experiencing more intense or more frequent flow states while awaiting uncertain news also reported a better emotional state during the wait (Rankin, Walsh, & Sweeny, 2017). In other words, distractions are good, and intensely absorbing distractions are even better.

Third, when distraction fails, mindfulness is a good alternative. The persistent, repetitive thoughts that characterize worry often drag people into the past (“Why did I say that to the interviewer?”) and launch people uncomfortably into the future (“How will I pay my bills if I don’t get that job?”). In contrast, practicing mindfulness grounds people in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), making it a perfect antidote to the discomfort associated with uncertainty. In fact, law graduates who practiced mindfulness while awaiting their bar exam results felt that they were coping better with the wait and managed their expectations more effectively (Sweeny & Howell, 2017). Better yet, the mindfulness intervention was particularly effective for those who typically struggle the most with uncertainty (i.e., those low in dispositional optimism and tolerance of uncertainty).

Finally, it may be helpful to seek silver linings in bad news before it arrives—a strategy called preemptive benefit finding—although this strategy can backfire if the news turns out well. In a study of voters’ experiences prior to and following the 2016 U.S. presidential election,

Clinton supporters who engaged in preemptive benefit finding in the weeks leading up to Election Day were less shattered by their loss; however, Trump supporters who used the same strategy were less elated at their win (Rankin & Sweeny, 2017). Nonetheless, people readily engage in preemptive benefit finding. In a study of women undergoing a breast biopsy, 70% of these women indicated that they could imagine some good coming from a cancer diagnosis (e.g., personal growth, strengthening relationships; Rankin, Le, & Sweeny, 2017). Future research can determine whether the advantages of this strategy outweigh its costs.

Unanswered Questions and Future Directions

Research on the experience of awaiting uncertain news has grown by leaps and bounds in the past decade, yet the topic remains ripe for further investigation. The studies to date have relied on self-report measures, which may be appropriate for assessing “in the head” experiences like worry and many coping strategies but less so for sleep quality, health behaviors, and social support. Future research should seek to include objective measures of observable behavior and physiological measures of stress and health.

Another open question is when and why various coping strategies are effective, either for reducing distress during a waiting period or buffering people from distress in response to bad news. The bulk of studies that have systematically examined coping efforts during waiting periods have focused on a moment of highly consequential professional uncertainty, namely the bar exam. Perhaps some coping strategies are effective in different domains (e.g., health or financial uncertainty), or during shorter or longer waiting periods, or while awaiting more or less consequential news. Studies currently underway significantly broaden the scope of inquiry, including further studies of patients undergoing a breast biopsy, lab-based studies of students awaiting socially evaluative feedback, and field studies of PhD students on the academic job

market and DACA recipients (beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program) awaiting Congressional action to protect their residency in the U.S., among others.

Finally, given the sometimes-unmanageable levels of anxiety that arise during personally significant waiting periods (e.g., Nosarti et al., 2002), the need for effective interventions is clear. Mindfulness meditation is one promising intervention (Sweeny & Howell, 2017), but the findings require replication and extension to other waiting periods, and meditation is not appealing to everyone. Similarly, inducing a flow state may be effective for reducing distress and increasing positive emotions, but guiding people toward the right types of activities can be challenging (Rankin et al., 2017). Other interventions, such as simple positive mood inductions, attentional retraining (McCloud & Mathews, 2012), or reframing worry as beneficial (Jameison, Mendes, & Nock, 2013), remain untested. Perhaps it is appropriate that uncertainties remain in the study of uncertainty.

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Recommended readings:

Montgomery, M. (2010). Uncertainty during breast diagnostic evaluation: State of the science. *Oncology Nursing Forum, 37*, 77-83. (a review of the literature on uncertainty in the context of breast cancer)

Sweeny, K., & Cavanaugh, A. G. (2012). Waiting is the hardest part: A model of uncertainty navigation in the context of health news. *Health Psychology Review, 6*, 147-164. (a theoretical paper laying out the model at the heart of the research reviewed here)

Sweeny, K. (2012). Tips for waiting well. *Social & Personality Psychology Compass, 6*, 258-269. (a highly accessible summary of strategies that might help people to wait in more productive ways)