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How Practical Wisdom Helps Us Cope with Radical Uncertainty

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The stress of uncertain pain outsizes the stress of certain pain. These were the results of a 2016 study, published long before the uncertainty of Pandemic 2020 was running the world show. In the study, participants with a 50 percent chance of receiving a shock were more stressed than those with a one hundred percent chance of receiving a shock. In other words, it wasn't just the possibility of a shock that caused stress—it was its uncertainty. This study provides experimental evidence for something most of us are experiencing now: the uncertainty of not knowing what will happen in our world, to our jobs, for our kids, or to our health if we deign to hug friends and family or eat in a restaurant is agonizing. It's no surprise, then, that a recent study showed a threefold increase in psychological distress from prepandemic times.

Psychological distress in the face of uncertainty is no accident—it's human nature. Jill Stoddard, a clinical psychologist and author of a book about managing anxiety, told us, "Our anxiety and discomfort are products of evolution. Anxious early humans who avoided uncertainty had a survival advantage." Modern life makes it even harder to tolerate anxiety, Stoddard added: "If you want the answer to any question, just ask your device. If you want to know whether a restaurant, product, or service will meet your expectations, just go to your favorite search engine. Because technology has deleted our ability to strengthen our tolerance of uncertainty muscles, we have become progressively more anxious when faced with the unknown." As one recent research study showed, problematic levels of technology use are associated with higher intolerance of uncertainty.

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longing for certainty and an end to the maze of unanswerable questions. We yearn for rules that can guide healthier, happier living, rules that would offer clear parameters as to "what counts as being safe." But, despite efforts from researchers and policymakers, few such rules have arrived. Troublingly, when they do, they tend offer a rapidly moving target, such as the viral video describing a complex process of how to safely grocery shop during coronavirus that was followed in short order by other experts dismissing much of the advice it offered. Clearer and more consistent rules may arrive at some point, but in the meantime we need guidance in managing the pain of our uncertainty.

Instead of anxiously awaiting clearer rules or for uncertainty to diminish, we can look back. Way back, to the Greek philosopher Aristotle.

In our environment of competing priorities and rampant uncertainties, we can turn to a particular kind of judgment that Aristotle explored in his classic *Nicomachean Ethics*. This kind of judgment, called "practical wisdom," means knowing how to balance conflicting aims and principles. This kind of wisdom acknowledges that uncertain risk cannot be eliminated, but guides us in becoming wiser about how we manage it. As we confront terrifying and uncertain trade-offs, we can learn how to wisely judge competing goods. Practical wisdom can help us balance priorities, like physical health, financial security, protection for medical professionals, teachers, and other frontline workers, and the academic, social, and psychological health of our children.

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Practical wisdom develops out of what we learn from books, data, and teachers. Many of us are already on a data-gathering mission when it comes to COVID-19, monitoring the news and the latest data as if our lives depend on it (which, in fact, they can). Those data are a critical place to begin. But wisdom also depends on something besides cold, hard facts. It requires lived experience and knowledge of the people for and about whom we are making decisions.

Economist and author Emily Oster uses tools from social science to help individuals in a role where uncertainty reigns supreme: parenting. In her research-driven guides on pregnancy (*Expecting Better*) and parenting (*Cribsheet*), Oster offers a two-step process that begins with data. But, according to Oster, data can't "tell you the single right answer for every person. It's just going to tell you some information and some

tradeoffs you have to think about." The important next step is to take "data and combine it with things you know about your family's preferences and what you think will work for your family and put those together to make a decision that's right for you." This approach may be particularly useful when considering specific circumstances like those of families with members who are older or who have underlying health risks, families with children who experience enormous distress when social engagement is limited, or individuals who could lose jobs if they don't show up on-site for work.

We can also remind ourselves that knowledge is never complete nor are outcomes certain, even though decisions must get made. It may be hard to recall, but in more normal times we routinely made choices balancing risk. Some of those risks are ones we didn't—and don't—think much about: we drive cars, swim in oceans, and cross streets without much concern. Of course, many of the risks we accept are augmented by standardized safeguards: airbags and seatbelts in our cars, lifeguards at the beach, and stop signs, street lights, and crossing guards. We accept risk when risk seems low, when the benefits seem obvious, and when experience and technologies assist us in tolerating risk that cannot be avoided. And we accept some risks simply because we are used to living with them. We tolerate the uncertainty of outcomes because this is a part of being alive.

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If it feels like we are flying blind now, that's because risk and uncertainty are growing. And with greater risk and uncertainty, we naturally experience greater stress. Parents, for example, seldom worried about sending kids to school during flu season (or, if they did, it didn't stop most kids from attending). Now, parents are agonizing over what to do when schools reopen. If given a choice, what will be better, remote learning or in-person learning? How can they factor in grandparents who may need to cease visiting grandchildren once kids re-engage the world outside their home? How can they balance kids' physical health, mental health, social and academic priorities? How can they make these decisions when the rates of COVID-19 fluctuate, without warning, from week to week? It's a tangled thicket of uncertainty.

We can begin with our knowledge about what the risks are, and self-knowledge about what risks we are willing to take and what benefits we'd like to prioritize. And we can use practical wisdom to steer through the uncertainty, just as we might

navigate a busy city full of aggressive drivers and no crosswalks. Here are four ways we can lean on Aristotle's ideas to guide us through the uncertain terrain:

1. Start with the data (what we *do* know and what we *can* control)

Uncertainty feels so terrifying that it tends to consume all of our attention. To combat the stress of uncertainty, direct attention to areas of relative certainty. Just as you would learn which intersections have makeshift crosswalks or less traffic, you can learn what behaviors in your control would be helpful. In this way, we know that wearing masks, washing hands, disinfecting surfaces, and maintaining social distance can reduce viral spread. Stoddard uses this tip in her own life: "When I notice my anxiety rising, I think about what I can and can't control. I can't control the pandemic and its consequences, but I can turn to my husband for support when I'm feeling overwhelmed, and I can make extra efforts to be affectionate, attuned, and loving with my kids."

2. Avoid black and white thinking

A wise person recognizes that almost all situations and choices are accompanied by infinite shades of gray, and that we cannot eliminate risk, no matter what we do. In fact, even a decision to never leave our homes until a busy city puts up crosswalks could leave us trapped at home for longer than would be healthy. Similarly, waiting for a vaccine is accompanied by all sorts of risk—reduced physical activity because of staying home, social isolation that can lead to depression and anxiety, and boredom that can breed intellectual stagnation. Wisdom demands balancing conflicting priorities—from physical health to psychological health, and from care for our children to care for our teachers and school staff. Priorities will conflict much of the time. Optimizing benefit and reducing risk still means there will be some risk. We are better off when we choose risk wisely.

3. Start with the rules, and then consider wise modifications

If rules are like GPS instructions to get to a friend's house, then COVID-19 is like the three-car pileup and EMT crews that the GPS failed to account for. You could stick around and wait for your GPS reroute, but you might trap yourself by doing so. Instead, you could explore a different route. The better you know the local area, the more tempting deviating from the GPS rules will be. More detailed knowledge means better judgment and less reliance on rules. There is uncertainty either way, of course, but there is much to be said for using the GPS as a rough guide, to be modified by your familiarity with the roads and your self-knowledge about what kinds of risk it is wise for you and those you love to tolerate.

4. Learn to accept uncertainty—it is a key ingredient for fostering wisdom

Practical wisdom requires an appreciation that there is no perfect choice, and that each choice has benefits, drawbacks, and uncertainties. An abundance of research reveals that tolerating uncertainty to engage in trial-and-error learning helps us develop cognitive networks that can guide us through new experiences. And, as Stoddard explained, "acceptance creates a space where we can choose to act wisely, making space for discomfort so we might approach things that matter to us, rather than reacting on autopilot to the uncertainty." When we make decisions wisely, we can ease our distress by pausing to appreciate that we are doing the best we can in alarmingly uncertain circumstances.

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In truth, the world we inhabit is an uncertain place. There are no guarantees, even when we generate safety measures to reduce risk or habituate to uncertainties that are a part of living. In a pre-COVID world, we had learned to live so well with most of the uncertainty we face that we tended not to notice it. COVID-19 has introduced uncertainties that we haven't yet learned to live with. And the stakes are high.

To live life in these uncertain times, we need the skills of a trailblazer who can improvise rather than follow a rigid set of directions. Of course, it takes time and experience to get the lay of the land, to be able to plot a course that can reliably get you to your destination safely and on time. Until experience develops and improvisation becomes possible, we can use maps and improvised crosswalks as a guardrail for safety, even as we consider practically wise improvisations.