

You're Not Powerless in the Face of Uncertainty

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Summary:

Although part of our capacity to deal with the unknown is innate, a larger portion is learned.

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, we're all trying to cope with unprecedented levels of uncertainty. For several years I've been studying how we develop the capability to deal with uncertainty — to find the possibilities and opportunities within the unknown, rather than to panic and retreat from risk. In my research, I've interviewed innovators, founders, CEOs and scientists, as well as paramedics, gamblers, surfers and startup investors.

What I've learned is that, although part of our capacity to deal with the unknown is innate, a larger portion is learned. Those who develop this “uncertainty capability” are more creative, more successful and better able to turn uncertainty into possibility.

As the chemist Ben Feringa told me, “If you deal with uncertainty, you will fail.” Then, with a wry smile that communicated how much failure he'd faced on his way to creating the molecular machines for which he won a 2016 Nobel Prize, he added, “Allow yourself to feel the frustration for a few hours or a few days. But then ask yourself: What can I learn from it? What is the next step that I can be working on? Get resilient at handling the frustration that comes with uncertainty.”

Behavioral science research has underscored the impact of framing — how we perceive our options — on our responses. The people I studied framed the challenges they faced in a way that made it easier to deal with them.

Below are frames I observed frequently in my research and how they express themselves:

LEARNING: What can I learn from this challenge?

GAME: Frustration is all part of the game. Rather than beat ourselves up when we lose something, we see that while we may lose today, we could win tomorrow.

GRATITUDE: Recognize all that you already have.

RANDOMNESS: A lot of life is random. Failures and successes are less our fault than we may realize, so don't let a frustration keep you from trying again.

HERO: I learned about the hero frame from Benjamin Gilmour, an Australian filmmaker and former paramedic. He developed the ability to navigate uncertainty by seeing himself on a hero's journey.

Several years ago, when Gilmour was on a trip to the Khyber Pass, Pakistani authorities impounded his motorcycle. So, he continued on foot and along the way met a Pashtun boy who wanted to become a poet rather than go into his family's weapons business. Inspired by this story, Gilmour made two films: "Son of Lion," which premiered at Cannes, and "Jirga," which became Australia's entry into the 2019 Oscars. These films came to be only because Gilmour persisted through obstacles: the first time when his motorcycle was impounded, and the second time when the funding for "Jirga" got pulled. Rather than give up, he shot a stunning film with almost no budget.

"Most people see obstacles and they interpret it as a sign to stop," Gilmour told me. "I've learned to see obstacles as the sign I was heading the right direction."