

**Transcript for Toolbox | Becoming Friendly with Uncertainty (Episode 630)**  
**Full show notes found here: <https://theartofcharm.com/630/>**

JORDAN: With every single unexpected blow, it's almost as if the world is trying to remind us that stability is just a myth. We don't need to suffer unnecessarily or fail to prepare for hard times but we can recognize that avoiding uncertainty entirely is a fool's errand.

Welcome to The Art of Charm, I'm Jordan Harbinger. On this episode, we're doing an AoC Toolbox. This is about uncertainty. How to make uncertainty work in your favor, why uncertainty isn't your enemy -- this is a common refrain I think a lot of people are going through, young or old for that matter. Single, married -- doesn't matter. Uncertainty, instability -- it throws a lot of us off and I think that it can be used to your advantage.

I've done a lot of things that have made me unstable, uncertain throughout the last 10 plus years -- even before that -- of running The Art of Charm, learning this stuff, going to Wall Street -- All this stuff has really given me some serious insight, and opinions for that matter, in uncertainty. We throw in a little bit of scientific research, for that classic AoC mix of science backed, actionable advice around the concept of uncertainty. So I really hope you enjoy this one. It's going to be just me today so bear with me but I think this is going to be fantastic and if you feel unstable or uncertain, you're not sure where you're going next, this episode -- this AoC Toolbox episode should really help.

My life has been many things but mostly it's been an experiment. Outside of law school and Wall Street, which were probably my two most traditional chapters, I usually gravitated to the unexpected and the uncomfortable, whether it was attending high school in the former East Germany, working for an NGO in Mexico, traveling through North Korea when it first opened up to Americans, or building The Art of Charm, when the field of social dynamics was still a subcultural backwater for nerds and theorists and, let's be honest, some creeps.

And I can't say that every single moment of those experiences was really a blast. I definitely wouldn't call them comfortable. If you've been following *The Art of Charm* for a minute, you know that I've paid the price in dangerous countries, made my fair share of mistakes along the way, as has the whole team for that matter. But now that I'm on the other side, I can say that those days made me the guy that I am today. They weren't always easy but they were stimulating, formative, and demanding. They were periods of extreme uncertainty, which is why they made such an impact.

Now, human beings as we know, are wired to seek pleasure and avoid pain, and to do so as easily as possible. Given our conservative design, we spend most of our time consciously or unconsciously seeking stability and seeking comfort while avoiding uncertainty and avoiding stress. And yet, as all the research seems to tell us, it's precisely in the midst of uncertainty that we grow the most. Exercising on unstable surfaces stimulates muscle development. Running out of cash galvanizes a startup and puts everybody into beast mode. Rocky market conditions force investors to consider new investment strategies. Losing a job might force you to pick up a new skill or even recalibrate what you really want to do in your life. And in almost every field, positive evolution happens not in the cocoon of certainty, but in periods of instability.

Uncertainty isn't a part of life; it actually is life. We live in a mutating world, always turning and changing and surprising us, which makes sense since we're mutating beings. As much as we crave comfort, we're built to play, we're built to discover, we're built to adapt and become a number of different people over the course of our lives. Our flexibility as a species and the uncertainty of our world are locked in a timeless evolutionary dance: life changes and we change in response. In the past several years, a number of studies have shed light on exactly what uncertainty is, how it operates, and why humans are designed to avoid it. To really thrive in uncertainty, we need to

understand it. So, let's take a quick look at some of the latest research.

Okay, you probably know uncertainty as a visceral anxiety that arises in response to change or even the thought of change. But what exactly is uncertainty beyond our subjective experience?

The best definition comes from Frank H. Knight. He's one of the leading economists of the last century and he defined uncertainty as the state of an organism that lacks information -- information about whether, where, when, how, or why an event has occurred or will occur.

What's useful about this definition is its focus on data. As carbon machines that are designed to make sense of the world, we're very sensitive to information: what that information says, what it means, and -- and this is the crucial part -- how much of it we manage to get relative to how much of it we really want. That gap is where uncertainty is born, giving rise to those familiar feelings of helplessness, confusion, paralysis --

So why does uncertainty arise in that gap? Well, because as Ian R. Inglis explains, information is how we predict and control our environment. Our cognitive models -- the mental maps we literally use to survive -- actually require the continual reduction of uncertainty so that information-gathering can properly function. In other words, we are creatures built for stable environments. The less certain the environment, the more unstable our mental maps, the less information we successfully process, the less we control the world around us, and the more we avoid new and interesting information.

So, it's no surprise that we think of uncertainty as bad, because in many ways it is bad. It's bad for our ancient brains, which hunger to know, analyze, and control but can only know, analyze, and control so much information at a time.

From the brain's perspective, there's just never enough information so it never stops feeling uncertain. And this is

where the research gets really interesting because it turns out that uncertainty isn't inherently bad. Instead, it's actually what happens within conditions of uncertainty that determines our experience of uncertainty in the first place.

Take a look at this landmark study by Yoav Bar-Anan, Timothy D. Wilson, and Daniel T. Gilbert in which they propose the uncertainty intensification hypothesis. This fancy term basically says that uncertainty makes unpleasant events even more unpleasant but that it also makes pleasant events more pleasant. In other words, uncertainty itself isn't a problem, it merely amplifies your current circumstances, be they good or bad. And that idea builds on earlier research that found uncertainty following a positive event actually prolongs the pleasure that it causes.

In one study, participants were shown a pleasurable movie, based on a true story, and were then provided with two possible accounts of what happened to the main character after the movie was made. Participants who remained in a state of uncertainty about the character were in a good mood for significantly longer than participants who were told either that the first or second account was actually true. That's pretty fascinating, right? We tend to think of uncertainty as something to avoid and it is, so long as we create stability, but we rarely think about the upside of uncertainty, the ways in which it actually enhances our positive experiences. Bar-Anan and his team also point out one more crucial thing which is that uncertainty has both an informational component -- in other words that gap, that deficit in knowledge -- and a subjective component -- that feeling of not knowing. And that will be useful in a moment when we get to specific ways to harness uncertainty.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: So uncertainty is actually more complicated than it seems, we've covered that, which actually makes it more useful to explore. Now to sum up the latest research, uncertainty is a

function of the availability of information, in other words, how much we want versus how much is available to us. A gap in information creates uncertainty and makes it harder for us to understand and control the world around us. The less control we feel, the more stability we crave and the fear in new experiences and stimuli we seek out. Uncertainty itself isn't good or bad but actually serves to enhance our emotional reactions to events. In other words good events feel better, bad events feel worse. And last but not least, uncertainty has an informational aspect the data gap leading to uncertainty and a subjective experience. In other words, how it feels on a gut level to be uncertain. So, with that in mind, let's dive into specific strategies for becoming friendly with uncertainty.

All right, a few weeks back my friend Austin was calling me to talk about his job search. He left his corporate job two years back to join a fintech startup -- financial tech startup -- that ended up folding. And now he's doing the interview rounds at a number of financial services companies. He still had some savings but, as you know, they're dwindling when you don't have a job for a while and no one had made an offer to him yet. He barely went out anymore, we could barely hang, he dreaded being asked what he did for a living which brought up some anxiety in social situations, of course. But the really scary thing, he finally confessed, was that the interview process made him even less sure about what he really wanted to do with his life. So these were pretty uncertain, scary times for Austin.

So I asked him, "What do you wish you could do or know right now that you don't already?" and without missing a beat, he told me. "I wish I could just get rid of this feeling. This awful feeling of not knowing what my life will be like." So think about that, Austin didn't want budgeting advice, interview tips, conversation tactics, career guidance, whatever -- he just wanted to avoid the feeling of being uncertain. And I've heard a version of this from literally hundred of students here at AoC, hundreds of listeners of the podcast and I get it. I've been there.

We've all felt the desire to eliminate uncertainty even more than tackling the challenges that create uncertainty in the first place, which is why if you run a Google search for "Coping with Uncertainty," you'll find no shortage of bloggers eager to help you out. You'll find stuff like, "Eleven Ways Emotionally Intelligent People Overcome Uncertainty," and spiritual websites with their own handy lists like, "Seven Ways to Deal with Uncertainties so You can be Happier and Less Anxious." And if you can't beat uncertainty, then you can learn to deal with it by following a few "Tips on Tolerating Uncertainty."

And all of these articles begin with the assumption that uncertainty is something we must overcome, we gotta get rid of that -- the implicit premise being that uncertainty is something that's just undesirable, can't have that in our life, we've got to avoid that, it's like illness or danger -- if we have any hope of being successful, stable, and emotionally healthy, we can't have uncertainty.

And I just disagree with that. I disagree with that entirely and that's what I told Austin. Because, not only is uncertainty a fundamental constant in life, it's actually one of the most helpful and productive environments available to us at all, anywhere. And after years of studying this stuff, I am convinced that it's not uncertainty we need to move beyond, but our aversion to uncertainty. And that's what most self-help approaches don't really understand -- that by trying to avoid uncertainty, we're really just increasing it and we're missing out on a huge opportunity. So once we stop turning uncertainty into the enemy, we can begin to look at it, we can begin to understand it, and we can begin to actually enjoy it. So rather than fleeing from it, we can actually invite it in and use it to our advantage. And that starts with the way we think.

Now, as the research teaches us, uncertainty is a mental emotional state produced by the brain when it wants more information than it has access to right now. So what the brain doesn't care about is whether that information is true, whether it's useful, or even important in this moment in time. The brain

is simply wired to consume data in pretty much any form. When it knows there's more data out there, it throws itself into cognitive panic. Welcome to my life. Welcome to your life, right?

But think about this, how many decisions have you made in your life, big and small, without knowing every piece of relevant data? More than you can count, I'm sure. For me that's for sure the case. From taking a different route home to moving to a new city to starting a new company, you've spent most of your life making choices without knowing everything there was to know about how things would turn out as a result of those choices. And I'm willing to bet you've done it pretty well.

So once you realize how much of life is lived with limited to information, you start to see just how well you operate in your relative ignorance, and to the data hungry brain, we're always ignorant, right? We leave jobs and pursue careers without knowing precisely where we're heading. We launch new products to unknown customers or no customers, we gather data, and we adapt along the way, and we enter relationships with people we're still getting to know and our ignorance about them, which we experience as curiosity, actually becomes part of the fun. We might not feel comfortable every step of the way but we operate without knowing the full story in every aspect of our lives. The information gap is real but it doesn't mean it's important. Let me repeat that. The information gap is real, but that does not mean that it is important. The fact is, we live in a world that never gives us enough information and we operate very well in fact, despite not having that information.

So, the next time you catch your brain scavenging for more information, just take a moment, take a breath, and notice that mental movement. This form of meditation, if you will, of watching your hyperactive brain drive itself freaking crazy, hunting for more information, especially when there's no more information to be found, is the first step towards navigating that uncertainty. And I've shared all this with Austin, of course.

And a few weeks later, he moved into the final rounds with two companies that really interested him. Both of which, by the way, he hadn't taken seriously until his uncertainty made him consider new career paths. This time, I could hear something new in his voice. A little bit of excitement, a little bit of amusement -- he told me he was driving himself crazy. Of course he didn't know where he was going to end up. If he did, he'd be done with the job search, but he wasn't. He's putting one foot in front of the other, staying open, and trying not to ask too many questions about things he can't possibly know and lose a bunch of sleep doing it. If you find that you do need more information to close the information gap, it's important to know what kind of information you really need.

Now as we've discussed, the brain craves data in conditions of uncertainty, even if that data isn't actually meaningful. We can override that impulse by being disciplined and deliberate about the information we consume.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: Ben is an AoC grad. He's been working on some social event software for the past year. The product is doing pretty well and when we last caught up, he was meeting with prospective partners to build out the platform, grow the business, scale, you know, insert buzzword here. And as we talked, he shared his concerns about some of these conversations, all of which took the form of questions. "Can this guy actually drive new customers to our service? Can this gal actually meet our technical requirements? If things don't work out with this group of people, can we go back and work with that group of people? Are we mature enough as a product to have partners in the first place?"

None of these questions are bad, of course. Ben was just doing his best to formulate a good strategy in conditions of extreme uncertainty, which pretty much sums up tech, sums up Silicon Valley, sums up entrepreneurship -- and, in all of these questions -- these are the right ones to ask during negotiations.

But what struck me, was that Ben wasn't concerned about whether this information was actually obtainable right now, he just wanted it.

I mean he could never really know, with complete certainty, whether partner A is going to increase sign ups -- not, of course, until they actually form a partnership and give it a shop. He can't be confident that partner B is going to meet his standards -- not until he talked with some their past clients and laid out the requirements. And why worry about partner C? They hadn't even started partnering yet and he's already trying to figure out what to do when it doesn't work out. It's kind of like starting a relationship and thinking, "Well when we break up, this is what's going to happen." Ben's information gap was telling him he needed answers right now and if he had to make the decision on whom to partner with right this second, as if he had to know that he made the right decision right this second, well all he really needed to know was that it's worthwhile to meet with these people first. That's it. And it's funny how that happens, right? It's almost as if our brains don't care whether the information is even usable or available. It just wants more and more and more and we're left scrambling to retrieve it.

So, once you catch your brain obsessing over the information gap, ask yourself these two questions. "Can I actually get this information" and "Do I actually need to know this information right now?" You will be amazed how often your brain will hunger for information it can't possibly obtain to answer questions it doesn't even need to ask. And with that perspective, you are free. You are free to stop obsessing, you are free to start focusing only on the information that can actually serve you right now.

For Ben, that was information about his own product's needs and what these prospective partners could offer. Nothing more, nothing less. Once he took the meetings, he discovered the new needs and new offerings, which opened up new questions and over the course of the discussions, he learned to be disciplined about the data that he was seeking. He stopped seeking

information about the things that hadn't happened yet and started getting more interested in the information that he actually needed now. All of which, he told me by email recently, helped him find a partner that he really loves, saved a ton of energy along the way.

Life is designed to survive and survival depends on stability. The human project over the last two and a half million years, if you really think about it, has basically been an effort to reduce instability as much as possible. We build shelter to protect ourselves, we manage food supplies to feed ourselves, we fight for stable jobs to support ourselves, and we organize into tribes to anchor ourselves, all in an effort to engineer certainty or the illusion of certainty, as much as possible. But, no matter how stable we make our lives, uncertainty always has a way of creeping in. A storm wipes out our home, a drought threatens our agriculture, a recession eliminates our job, and conflict breaks down our communities. With every single unexpected blow, it's almost as if the world is trying to remind us that stability is just a myth and every time that happens, our natural response seems to be, "No stability is our purpose."

We fight uncertainty by clinging even more desperately to certainty. And then another storm hits, another recession appears, and conflict -- as we know all too well -- never goes away. Now whether uncertainty is good or bad, we have to accept that it's an integral part of life. We don't need to suffer unnecessarily or fail to prepare for hard times, but we can recognize that avoiding uncertainty entirely is a fool's errand. More than that, it's a missed opportunity, which brings us to our final strategy. Trust that uncertainty exists to serve you.

Now that I've been through a few major stages and cycles in my own life, I know when uncertainty creeps in and I know how it operates. I'm not unaffected by it. No one is. No matter what they tell you. But, I've learned to trust that every time uncertainty has visited me, it's made me a stronger, richer, more interesting person. Even if I don't feel that day to day, I

believe that. I choose to, mostly because it makes life more interesting.

As you might now, I met Jenny, my wife in L.A. a few days before she was moving back to the Bay area to make a major career move. I was growing restless in L.A., I'd already been thinking about exploring a new city, our timing could not have been worse. In fact, it was kind of a bummer because I knew I had met someone extraordinarily special and neither of us seemed to be in a place to commit to each other.

True to the uncertainty intensification hypothesis, the instability of that period was heightening the excitement of the relationship, while amplifying the sadness that it might not go anywhere. But instead of treating the uncertainty as an obstacle or interpreting it as a sign to call it quits, we just decided to roll with it. We got a temporary place in L.A. together, which she already had, to be honest. Basically I just shacked up with her. Let's not get bogged down on the terminology. But she commuted to school for a bit and we used the transition period as an opportunity to get to know each other in what turned out to be a turbulent, ambiguous, but also very exciting time.

We both evolved like crazy and I won't bore you with all the details but during that period Jen became laser focused on her education and career move while I invested heavily in building the podcast and redesigning our sales system. I came to appreciate a whole different side of L.A. while we both realized during our commutes that we actually wanted to end up in the Bay instead.

She became more patient, I became more communicative, we both grew more thoughtful and curious about our lives, and of course, we discovered what we were like in a real relationship. Not when things were neat and tidy and perfect, but when our lives were in deep flux. By not knowing exactly where our story was headed, we were able to enjoy the challenge of writing it, which only happened thanks to the uncertainty of it all. Even for those of us who are naturally anxious about change,

knowing that change will ultimately fuel our growth makes it easier to take in stride. Trusting that uncertainty is designed not to just throw you, but to make you a better person, is an essential step in embracing it. Over time that trust will turn into excitement. After a few cycles of uncertainty leading to personal growth, new challenges will carry a hidden promise, a new problem, a new set of skills, and a new identity waiting for you on the other side.

That Bar-Anan et al study taught us that the fulfillment we get from thriving in uncertainty is actually greater because uncertainty only amplifies how we already feel. If we suffer through instability, we feel even worse. If we grow through instability, we feel even stronger. It's not uncertainty that dictates our moods but how we operate during that uncertainty, which means we can actually use the affective power of uncertainty to heighten our sense of accomplishment during periods of adversity, by embracing it as fuel rather than just avoiding it as a burden.

Most of the great self-help coaches have echoed an ancient piece of wisdom: that everything in life happens for you, not to you.

You could say the same of uncertainty. Instability isn't a problem that threatens, it's an opportunity that visits. If you don't feel that naturally -- and many of us don't, myself included -- which is perfectly normal, by the way -- then try this exercise as an experiment: act as if uncertainty is always happening in your favor. What happens when you accept change as if you had chosen it yourself?

Byron Katie, the teacher, puts it like this, "You don't have to like how life plays out, it's just easier if you do." Apply that to uncertainty and you're on your way to making it your friend.

I hope you all found that useful. This is the culmination of over a decade of insight of frankly being in business, switching careers, all that kind of uncertainty that used to just drive me

nuts and keep me up at night and basically, caused lots of hair to fall out. I hope it helps you stay hairy, I guess, for lack of a better -- for a better term there. Stay hairy, everybody. But first I want to encourage you to join our AoC challenge at [theartofcharm.com/challenge](http://theartofcharm.com/challenge). You can also text the word 'charmed,' that's C-H-A-R-M-E-D to 33444.

This challenge is about improving your networking and connection skills and inspiring people around you to develop a relationship with you, personal or professional. It's free -- a lot of people aren't really sure what's going on there. It's free. That's the idea. This is just a fun way to start the ball rolling, get some forward momentum, and we'll send you our fundamentals Toolbox that includes episodes like this. It also includes some great practical stuff, ready to apply, right out of the box, on reading body language, the science of attraction, nonverbal communication, negotiation techniques, persuasion tactics, networking and influence strategies, everything that we teach here at The Art of Charm. It'll make you a better networker, a better connector, and of course, a better thinker. You can find that at [theartofcharm.com/challenge](http://theartofcharm.com/challenge) or text 'charmed,' C-H-A-R-M-E-D to 33444.

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