



Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA)

How to Stay Grounded

When Life Is Uncertain

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What Is Tolerance of Ambiguity?

Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA) is your capacity to stay composed, flexible, and effective when faced with uncertainty, complexity, inconsistency, or incomplete information. It reflects how well you can “sit with not knowing” without becoming overwhelmed.

People naturally vary in how much ambiguity they can tolerate:

- Some find uncertainty energising, creative, or filled with possibility.
- Others find it unsettling, stressful, or threatening.

The concept was first introduced by psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswik (1949). Later, Budner (1962) described:

- Intolerance of Ambiguity (IOA) as viewing uncertainty as threatening.
- Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA) as viewing uncertainty as interesting, manageable, or even desirable.

Why Is TOA So Important?

Modern life is increasingly fast-paced and unpredictable. Our ability to tolerate ambiguity affects our mental health, our relationships, and our overall resilience.

A strong tolerance of ambiguity helps you:

- Pause before reacting to confusing or distressing situations.
- Adapt flexibly to unexpected changes or complex decisions.
- Reduce stress and anxiety associated with rigid thinking or fear of the unknown.
- Foster creativity and innovation, especially when there is no clear solution.

Conversely, low TOA often leads to:

- Avoidance or procrastination
- Micromanagement
- Rigid rules and routines
- Inflexibility
- Overwhelm when plans change

These patterns can easily become exhausting and counterproductive.

TOA and Mental Health

Difficulties tolerating ambiguity can become a cognitive vulnerability, especially under stress. People with lower TOA are more likely to:

- Experience higher levels of anxiety and depression
- Interpret uncertainty as threatening
- Fall into black-and-white thinking
- Overestimate danger or risk
- Engage in repetitive worry and “what-if” thinking

Individuals low in TOA may appear:

- Rigid
- Dogmatic
- Closed-minded
- Easily overwhelmed
- Punitive or anxious when pressured

On the other hand, being overly tolerant of ambiguity can lead to:

- Indecision
- Difficulty committing to goals
- Lack of direction
- Inconsistency in relationships or routines

Healthy psychological functioning requires balance — enough structure for stability, enough openness for growth.

Our Need for Order and Control

The human brain is wired to seek patterns and predictability. Structure feels safe. Familiarity feels comforting. We naturally gravitate toward:

- Routines
- Rules
- Explanations
- Clear answers

But life is inherently uncertain and impermanent. No matter how well we plan:

- Accidents happen
- Relationships change
- Loved ones are lost
- Unexpected outcomes occur
- The future remains unknowable

Trying to eliminate all uncertainty is impossible — and attempting to do so is emotionally draining.

The Trap of Over-Control

When people struggle with ambiguity, they often try to manage anxiety by tightening control over their environment. This may look like:

- Excessive planning or list-making
- Constantly rechecking things
- Seeking reassurance
- Avoiding spontaneity
- Refusing to delegate
- Needing rigid rules or predictable routines

Although these behaviours can bring temporary relief, they reinforce the belief

that uncertainty is unsafe — which increases long-term anxiety.

The more tightly we cling to control, the more distressed we become when the unexpected inevitably occurs.

A More Flexible Approach

Building tolerance of ambiguity doesn't mean letting life happen without boundaries. It means learning to loosen your grip on the illusion of certainty.

Developing TOA involves:

- Accepting that confusion and discomfort are part of learning and growth
- Remaining grounded even when outcomes are unknown
- Replacing control with curiosity
- Allowing time for clarity to emerge
- Noticing the urge to react — and choosing to pause instead

TOA is a skill, not a personality trait. Like mindfulness, patience, or resilience, it can be strengthened through practice.

Want to Strengthen Your TOA?

Increasing your tolerance for ambiguity can:

- Reduce anxiety
- Improve decision-making
- Enhance emotional resilience
- Strengthen relationships
- Support long-term psychological flexibility

If you'd like practical tools to help build this skill, explore our companion guide: [Strategies for Building Tolerance to Ambiguity](#)

For Support

If you're finding uncertainty overwhelming or affecting your wellbeing, our team at iflow Psychology can help you build psychological flexibility, cope with change, and develop tools to navigate life's unpredictability with confidence.