



## Building Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA)

### Strategies to Optimise Adaptation, Psychological Flexibility, and Healthy Functioning

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Developing Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA) is a core psychological skill. It allows you to remain grounded, adaptive, and effective when life is uncertain, complex, or unpredictable. TOA can be strengthened through deliberate habits, attitudes, and behavioural practices.

Below are practical strategies to help build this important capacity.

#### 1. Work Within Your Circle of Influence

A key TOA skill is recognising the difference between:

- What you can influence
- What you can partially influence
- What is outside your control

This helps redirect energy away from rumination and frustration, and toward strategic action.

The aim is not to become passive or complacent. Instead, it involves:

- Letting go of what you cannot control
- Actively working within your sphere of influence to create positive change
- Accepting that outcomes may take time or involve uncertainty

Example: You may worry that governments or industries are not doing enough about climate change. Sitting with this frustration can create a negative emotional state.

Working within your circle of influence might involve:

- Reducing waste
- Driving less
- Choosing sustainable products
- Using energy more efficiently
- Sharing information or supporting environmental initiatives

As Gandhi suggested: “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

The goal is to transform concern into constructive action.

#### 2. Maintain Realistic Standards and Expectations

High TOA involves setting healthy, achievable standards.

Low TOA often involves perfectionism, which restricts learning and increases fear of failure.

- Expect success — but keep expectations realistic
- Learn to appreciate the beauty of imperfection
- Recognise that perfection is unattainable and psychologically costly
- Allow space for mistakes, experimentation, and course correction

Progress, not perfection, builds resilience.

### 3. Practise Acceptance

Acceptance is not resignation or approval. It is simply acknowledging reality as it is, without fighting the parts you cannot immediately change.

To strengthen TOA:

- Allow uncertainty to be present without treating it as a threat
- Recognise that every challenge also contains opportunity
- Understand that control is often an illusion, and chasing certainty can drain energy
- Respect life's natural cycles of growth, decay, renewal, and change

Life rarely unfolds in straight lines. Acceptance helps you engage the journey with openness.

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### 4. Develop Patience

Ambiguity is easier to tolerate when you give situations time to unfold.

- Slow down your response
- Gather information before acting
- Allow ideas to develop
- Sit with discomfort long enough to understand what it is telling you

Patience strengthens reflective thinking, which is essential for TOA.

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### 5. Seek Clarity When Possible

Not all ambiguity can be removed — but clarity helps reduce unnecessary confusion.

- Ask questions
- Communicate openly
- Clarify goals
- Identify what matters and what can wait

Seeking clarity is different from seeking certainty. One is helpful; the other is unattainable.

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### 6. Be Flexible

Flexibility allows you to adapt when plans shift, information changes, or outcomes are uncertain.

- Adjust quickly when needed
- Let go of rigid routines
- Show agility in thinking and behaviour

Flexibility is not passivity — it is a strength that helps you respond effectively to the unexpected.

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### 7. Focus on What Matters

Ambiguity can become overwhelming when everything feels important.

Strengthen TOA by:

- Minimising distractions
- Prioritising key tasks
- Avoiding unnecessary detail
- Breaking problems into manageable parts

Attention is a psychological resource — spend it wisely.

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### 8. Avoid Cognitive Traps

Cognitive distortions increase intolerance of ambiguity.

Instead of black-and-white thinking:

- Allow for shades of grey
- Consider multiple perspectives
- Challenge assumptions
- Explore alternative explanations

People with high TOA:

- Think critically
- Stay open-minded
- Avoid premature judgement
- Evaluate problems from different angles

This reflects cognitive flexibility — a core resilience skill.

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## 9. Strengthen Emotional Regulation and Mindfulness

Mindfulness supports TOA by keeping attention in the here and now, rather than in imagined future catastrophes.

Helpful practices include:

- Slow breathing
- Grounding techniques
- Body scan
- Mindful awareness of thoughts and emotions
- Non-judgemental observation

Regulating emotions allows you to remain level-headed when facing uncertainty.

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## 10. Cultivate Curiosity

Curiosity turns ambiguity into opportunity.

- Ask questions
- Explore multiple options
- Consult others
- Look for patterns, possibilities, and alternatives

Curiosity interrupts fear and reduces the urge for premature closure.

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## 11. Be Creative

Creativity increases resilience by expanding your range of responses.

- Think outside the box
- Challenge the status quo
- Test new strategies
- Experiment with different behaviours
- Reflect on outcomes — keep the helpful, adjust the unhelpful

Creativity and ambiguity tolerance reinforce each other.

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## 12. Collaborate

Ambiguity is easier to tolerate when shared with others.

- Discuss ideas
- Seek diverse viewpoints
- Build strong networks
- Encourage collective problem-solving

Different perspectives enrich understanding.

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## 13. Practise Assertiveness

Assertiveness supports TOA by allowing you to:

- Express your needs
- Communicate uncertainty
- Influence outcomes
- Negotiate solutions

Assertive communication builds confidence in ambiguous situations.

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## 14. Take Healthy, Values-Aligned Risks

New experiences build psychological flexibility.

Try:

- New activities
- Unfamiliar routes
- Small behavioural experiments
- Stretching comfort zones gradually

Taking manageable risks rewires the brain toward openness.

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## 15. Be Courageous

Courage is not the absence of fear — it is acting despite uncertainty.

Cultivating courage involves:

- Facing discomfort
- Speaking your truth respectfully
- Standing by your values
- Supporting others
- Approaching difficult situations rather than avoiding them

Courage strengthens your capacity to navigate complex challenges.

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## 16. Use Graded Exposure to Uncertainty

TOA grows slowly and steadily.

Start small:

- Tackle mild uncertainties first
- Progress to more challenging situations
- Allow time to adjust at each step
- Build confidence gradually

Change occurs through “baby steps,” not drastic leaps.

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## 17. Trust the Process

Learning to trust the process means:

- Allowing situations to unfold
- Loosening the need for immediate answers Respecting that clarity often emerges over time
- Flowing with change rather than fighting it

This mindset reduces frustration and enhances adaptability.

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## 18. Let Go and Move Forward

Letting go does not mean forgetting the past. It means unhooking from patterns that keep you stuck.

Strengthen TOA by learning to:

- Release rumination
- Reduce self-blame
- Reflect without dwelling
- Make decisions and move forward
- Practise self-forgiveness where appropriate
- Learn from mistakes without being defined by them

Growth requires letting go of what no longer serves you.

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