

# Managing Uncertainty (Anxiety) about Fertility

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# Welcome

## Purpose of this webinar/seminar

- Encourage reflection of the emotional aspects of dealing with fertility concerns
- Introduce you to some different ways to manage uncertainty and anxiety about fertility
  - Not all coping strategies will suit everyone, so we will introduce some breadth
- Invite in grace and compassion

## What we are not

- A therapy group or stand-in for a therapist
- A forum to ask medical questions
  - If you do have lingering medical questions, you can contact [aya@uhn.ca](mailto:aya@uhn.ca)

## Seminar Guidelines / Things to Note

- What you need: Paper/pen or App (e.g., paper/notebook, notes app, word, etc.)
- Once uploaded, resources hyperlinked within this presentation can be collectively found → [here](#).
- Alternatively, you can click on the individual hyperlinks where relevant as you move through the presentation
- If you have any difficulty accessing the hyperlinked resources, please contact [aya@uhn.ca](mailto:aya@uhn.ca)

What has been the hardest part about navigating the potential impact of cancer on your fertility?

\*\*this list is by no means exhaustive →

1. Impact on my sense of identity/body image
2. Impact on intimate relationship(s) or dating
3. Feeling isolated, lonely, or disconnected
4. Comparing myself to others
5. The uncertainty
6. Coping with my feelings
7. Other people's expectations or lack of understanding
8. Getting lost in what-ifs and worst-case scenarios
9. Getting stuck on, why me?
10. Attending baby showers or other triggering events

# What happens to us during a state of anxiety

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# Uncertainty-Inducing Situation

## Cognitive

## Physiological

The stories our mind tells us:

the what-ifs, worst-case scenarios, hyper-focus on what could go wrong, & what is out of our control (worry), self-critical thoughts, decreased concentration etc.

What's happening in our body:

weight/tightness in the chest, feeling sweaty, difficulty catching breath, muscle tension, stomachache, nausea, increased heart rate, feeling flushed, etc.

## When Anxiety is in the Driver's Seat

## Emotional

## Behavioural

What we feel:

fearful, dread, nervous, uneasy, frustrated or irritable, "wound up", "on edge", etc.  
Can also be accompanied by sadness or disappointment

What we do:

avoid, escape, distract, seek reassurance excessively, restless, fidget, fight-flight-freeze, Dr. Google, information-overload, disconnect from others & valued roles/activities, etc.

# The stories our anxious mind tells us

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The Narratives We Get Stuck  
in or Hooked By

1. All-or-nothing thinking: Thinking about the situation in black-and-white and extremes

"I will never be happy without a biological baby."

2. What-if thinking: The anxious part of our mind imagines typically only negative future scenarios. The what-ifs often pile on top of one another, often including questions that don't have answers

"What if I start to date and can't have children of my own, and then my partner leaves me, and I am alone and unhappy forever."

3. "Should-ing" on ourselves: When we hear our anxious mind saying or implying how we should or shouldn't feel/think.

"I shouldn't feel upset or jealous that my friend just had a baby."

4. Mental filtering: Blocking out positive and neutral information, and focusing almost exclusively on the negative

"Things just don't ever work out for me - why should I think that I will be okay."


5. Discounting our coping resources: Underestimating our ability to overcome or manage difficult situations

"If I can't have a family in the way that I imagined, I won't be able to cope or work through my grief. I won't be able to build a fulfilling life."

6. Overactivated internal critic: When our internal narrative becomes very self-critical and judgmental. It can also be about self-blame.

"I am damaged." "This is all my fault."





In reference to your fertility, what are your top two worries and, if applicable, one self-critical thought? (3-5 mins)

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Take a moment to reflect and write down responses to this question

1. Worry:

2. Worry:

3. Self-critical thought:

## Thoughts → Emotions:

Pick one thought that you wrote down on the previous slide and identify which emotion(s) come up for you in response to that thought

1. Worry, Fear, Dread, Anxiety

2. Frustration, irritability, anger

3. Disappointment, hopelessness, sadness

4. Embarrassment, guilt, shame

This link contains a comprehensive emotion wheel that you can use to identify and name your emotions if they are not listed above: [Link to Emotion Wheel](#)

# Why does being able to name our thoughts and emotions matter?

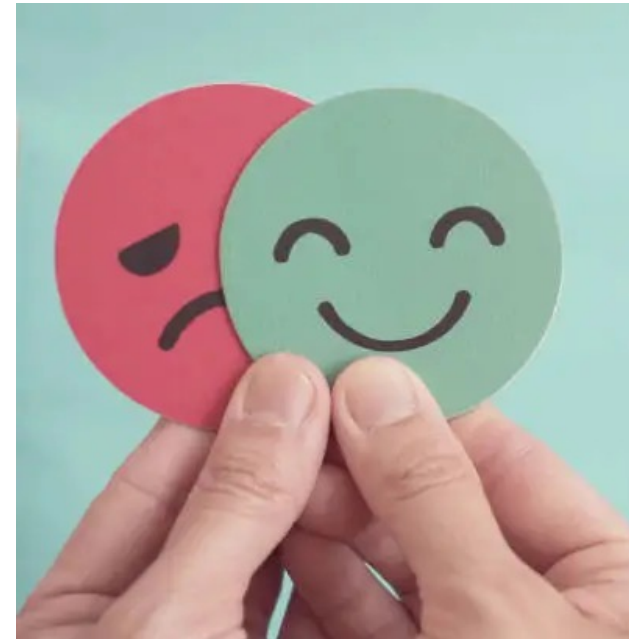
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We can't cope with, take care of, lessen, or soothe what we don't notice or pay attention to

- Meanwhile, these internal events are still impacting us and our body in the background and sometimes we only become aware after our "cup falls over" or we are triggered.

Noticing and naming difficult thoughts & emotions = chance to take a step back and make a choice, even if small, about how to best manage them / approach yourself or the situation

- There is a difference between:
  - I am scared vs. I am feeling scared vs. I am noticing that I am feeling scared
  - If I can't conceive, I will be unhappy forever vs. I am having the thought that if I can't conceive, I will be unhappy forever vs. I am noticing that I am having the thought that if I can't conceive, I will be unhappy forever



# How do we regulate?

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Becoming aware of, acknowledging and naming the difficult thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations that show up when anxiety is in the driver's seat

- Cultivate a healthy distance from those thoughts and feelings so that even if they are present, they are less overwhelming.

## Practices to Try:

1. Leaves on a Stream Mindfulness Practice
2. Dropping Anchor - Acknowledging thoughts & emotions , Connecting with your body, Engaging with the world around you (ACE)
3. Naming the Story - Name the narrative the anxious part of your mind tells you most often (e.g., "Ah, here it is again, The-I-will-never-be-happy-story")
4. Acknowledging and Naming our Emotions (see also previous slide)



# How do we regulate?

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Use the mind-body connection to feel more grounded: Coming back into our body when the mind starts to race.

1. **Mindful breathing:** Take a few breaths in as you normally would. Then, breathe in slowly through your nose to the count of four. Exhale slowly through the mouth, pursing your lips as if you were whistling, to the count of five (six if you can manage it). Pause for two. Repeat. Doing this for even 1 minute can help calm down your sympathetic nervous system, the part of our brain responsible for fight-flight-freeze.

- tip: making our exhale through the mouth slightly longer than our inhale can slow down heart rate and a racing mind

2. Box Breathing

3. 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Practice

4. Body Scan

5. Progressive Muscle Relaxation

# How do we regulate?

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Being compassionate to our "raw spots", especially those spots where we feel the most self-critical.

- Go back to the self-critical thought you identified earlier in this seminar (slide 9). Once you have it in front of you. Read it to yourself.
- Checking in internally: Would I be speaking to someone I care about in the same way?

Underneath the self-critical thought you wrote down, answer the following:

- If someone you cared about deeply came to you with this thought, what would you say? How would you respond to their self-criticism?
- How would you care for them? What would you encourage them to think about and do?



# How do we regulate?

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Take-home practice: Disentangling our worth from our fertility status; we are not our fertility status. This can take time to do. Below are a few questions to reflect on and answer to get you started. We recommend writing out your answers rather than typing, as the former is more effective at promoting emotional & cognitive processing.

- What are three character traits that you appreciate about yourself?
- What do your friends and [chosen] family most appreciate about you?
- Describe a situation in which you made a positive impact.
- Who and what are the people and things you care about (apart from your fertility status)?
- What inspires you and why?
- What roles do you hold currently and have held in the past? What hobbies do you enjoy?
- Describe two specific instances where you overcame something difficult/challenging and were proud of how you responded to it.
- What is one trait or quality you would like to develop? What are two initial steps you can take to develop or enact this trait?

# How do we regulate?

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Creating an affirmation or helpful coping statement; reminding ourselves of it often, incorporating it into a mindfulness practice. Some examples below (some shared by our webinar attendees).

I am here. I am okay. I am safe.

I can do and have done hard things.

Breathe & let go.

Webinar attendee: I am loved, and I am not alone.

Webinar attendee: Giving myself grace.

Webinar attendee: No matter what happens, things will be okay.



# How do we regulate?

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Directing our attention to what we can control. When faced with a significantly difficult external event or situation, our mind tends to focus on what we can't control. This often leads to time-travelling, back to the past that we cannot change or the future that hasn't arrived yet.

Identify important or meaningful activities, people (this can include yourself), roles, hobbies, or areas of life that you have become disconnected with:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

- Pick one from the list above and identify one small step forward towards reconnection. Make that step specific, achievable, and time-bound:

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# Reflection & Wrap-Up

As we wrap up today, what is one thing that you will take away (and apply!) from this webinar:

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Aftercare examples:

- Talking a walk
- Opening up a window, inhaling fresh air
- Listening to your favourite song
- Doing a mindful breathing exercise
- Taking a bath

Shared by our attendees:

- Eating a pastry
- Walking in the last bit of sunlight
- Hugging my cat
- Eating pasta