



# *Managing Stress and Uncertainty*

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## **Preface**

Stress and uncertainty are universal human experiences affecting everyone to various degrees but as many of us have realized, the path to and through medicine can be particularly demanding in this aspect.

I am a medical student finishing up my third year, I am definitely not an expert when it comes to managing stress and uncertainty. I wouldn't even say that I am particularly good at it, but I hope that some of the knowledge and perspective that I've gained over the past few years can help you develop your own strategies on how to manage them in a way that works for you.

Please note that the scope of this article is intended to be narrow but generalizable. Hence, I will be focusing on dealing with stressors and uncertainties stemming from the path to and through medicine itself — I will not be addressing dealing with stressors and uncertainties that inevitably arise due in interpersonal relationships and social interactions.

Below are a few non-exhaustive lists of common stressors and sources of uncertainty along the path to and through medicine to help contextualize what lays ahead:

### Pre-Medical School:

*Maintaining GPA, finances, extracurriculars, MCAT, applications, and interviews*

### Medical School:

*Relocating for medical school, imposter syndrome, finances, exams, extracurriculars, exploring specialties, rapidly changing clerkship rotations, preparing for CaRMS, CaRMS interviews, the match, MCCQE1 exam, and relocating for residency*



### Residency:

*True medical responsibility, very heavy workload, finances, MCCQE2 exam, research, subspecialty match, Royal College examinations, fellowship applications, interviews, securing employment, and transition to independent practice*

Clearly, there are many, many sources of stress and uncertainty along this path. Many times, we will have to face these challenges while we deal with other adversities in our personal lives. It is easy to see how these things can compound and quickly become paralyzing.

Developing a mindset and strategies for managing difficult times early on will at the very least make the whole experience less overwhelming and at best set us up for greater success down the road.

It is also important to realize that stress and uncertainty are separate entities. Even though the latter tends to be causally related to the former, I have found that having a separate mental framework and strategies for each to be the most helpful.

Let's begin.

### **Dealing with Uncertainty**

Uncertainty usually becomes an issue near events that are both high-stakes and somewhat or entirely outside of our control. In my experience it is the more difficult of the two to manage. More often than not the real issue it brings to the table is the inordinate amount of anxiety and stress that tends to follow. Dealing with it requires reflection to reframe your mindset and taking action when it is appropriate.

### *Reflection questions:*

1. **How is the uncertainty affecting you?** Try to come up with specific examples of how your state of wellbeing and behaviors are responding to the stress surrounding uncertainty. Try to assess both positive and negative examples. In my case, I have found that when an outcome is uncertain, I tend to perseverate and eventually settle on worrying about "bad" outcomes while ignoring neutral and "good" outcomes. I tend to lose sleep and have decreased focus on any immediate tasks I have at hand. The upside to this is that it forces me to critically evaluate things I could have done differently and implement it in similar situations in the future (more on this later). The key here is to assess how productive your own response to uncertainty is, if you can realize what responses are unproductive and productive you can begin actively shifting your thoughts towards the latter.



2. **Do you really need to feel uncertain?** Every situation is different, but more often than not there is still some degree of control that we can exert on the outcome of an event. Be honest with yourself about the situation you believe is uncertain and realistically list down the probability of each outcome. Try to be as objective as you can based on published statistics or your prior track record and you may realize that things are in your favor more often than you'd think. In situations where you might not have a good grasp of your actual odds because you cannot benchmark yourself externally, reflect on whether or not you've done as much as one reasonably would to shift things in their favor. If you've done all of that, you can rest easier knowing that you have already controlled the variables that you have control over. If you find that more often than not, your realistic odds are not in your favor AND there remains REASONABLE things you could have done to set yourself up better, then you've identified an area for growth when a similar situation presents itself in the future.
3. **What are the possible outcomes and what do they mean for you?** The magnitude of your response (level of stress and anxiety) should be proportionate to the consequences of a negative outcome. Take some time to evaluate all the possible outcomes and be specific and realistic about how each outcome will affect you moving forward. This will set you up to bounce back quickly if you've already thought about what might come after - you will be mentally primed to deal with whatever the result may be. Additionally, try to assess each outcome from a long-term perspective rather than short-term. You'll find that even if certain negative outcomes result in short-term setbacks, that there often remains opportunity to recover or even exceed your original goals in the long term.

### *Taking Action:*

Once you have asked yourself the reflection questions above, you may realize that there are some areas you can take action on either immediately, in the short term, or in the future.

1. **Take action immediately if there is still time before a hard deadline.** This is probably very obvious, but if you are in the process of preparing for a situation with uncertain outcomes such as a big exam or interview, try your best not to let the idea of the end result being uncertain prevent you from taking all reasonable steps to shape things in your favor.
2. **If a hard deadline has passed, prepare and plan for both positive and negative outcomes.** Once you have a realistic idea of what the potential outcomes may be, take some time to create general plans for each outcome. Make sure you balance out your efforts between planning for both positive and negative outcomes.



Uncertain situations that are significant enough to cause distress are usually going to lead to palpable changes in our lives whether the outcome is positive or negative. Focusing on planning only for negative outcomes feeds into additional stress and anxiety and only leaves you with additional work to do if things turn out well.

- 3. Reflect on things that went well and things that could be better the next time around.** Once you have a general idea of your plans, critically evaluate the things you did leading up until that point. First look at specific actions you did well to nudge things in your favour, write them down. Then, look for things that you could've done differently to affect the outcome. When doing this, make sure you are reasonable and holding yourself to a realistic standard. The next time a situation like this presents itself (and it definitely will), make sure you continue to implement strategies that have worked well, and start slowly implementing things you could have done differently.

## Dealing with Stress

Stress exists on a continuum, from absolutely none to entirely overwhelming. Usually you want to exist somewhere in between in a state of eustress (good stress).

Unfortunately, the path through medicine can push you towards the overwhelming side from time to time due to the sheer amount of work and learning one has to manage. Note that this section is mostly applicable to stress that is not the result of uncertainty. Dealing with stress is ultimately about making pragmatic choices to limit your sources of stress, building consistency into your life, and having appropriate outlets for stress at regular intervals. All the usual advice of eating well, making sure you exercise, and getting enough sleep still applies.

- 1. Limit your sources of stress by focusing your efforts on only the most important tasks or goals.** There are only 24 hours in a day, of which only 15-17 are spent awake, factor in a few other things we do every day — hygiene, commuting, eating, chores — and you're down to 12-14 very quickly. Many of us will also have a primary responsibility, whether that be our undergraduate studies, medical school, residency, employment, or even taking care of kids that demand most, if not all of that remaining time. Your time is valuable, and you should aim to ration it sensibly. Make a conscious effort to assess the activities and projects that you are involved in and consider removing yourself from them if they are not providing you significant benefit with regards to professional development, social interaction, altruism, or overall happiness.
- 2. Build your days around consistent points of productivity in your primary responsibility to prevent procrastination.** This is something I struggle with still to this day but am getting better at with time.



There will be days that you are exhausted or there will be a new development in a project that requires your attention but try your best to commit at least some time to your primary responsibility. Remember that procrastination does not mean you don't have to do whatever it is you need to do; it just means you're going to have to do it later and the quality may suffer as a result. That being said, do not hold yourself to unrealistic standards. Slipping from time to time is completely normal and often due to factors outside of our control. The key is to resume where you've left off. Once you've managed to build consistency surrounding your primary responsibility, you can try slowly adding other items to the list — again, focus on only the most important things, you will need some space and flexibility in your day to deal with unexpected events.

3. **Ensure that there is built in time to decompress in your schedule.** Everyone has different needs in terms of how often and how much they need to decompress. I have settled on a relatively simple and flexible schedule of doing at least: one small thing each day, one slightly bigger thing each week, one moderate thing each month, and one big thing each year. In my case one small thing means something to the effect of treating myself to a cold beverage after a long day and giving myself a couple of hours to watch a show or play some video games at the end of the week. Each month I would make sure I set aside a day or two that is dedicated only to what I want to do, it might be sleeping, taking photographs, or eating out for a nice meal — whatever I feel like for that time. I also try to make sure that I have at least one vacation away from home each year that is around one week in length, it doesn't have to be very far away, just enough to have a change of scenery. What works for you will definitely depend on what you like to do but coming up with a consistent commitment to yourself to decompress regularly at short, moderate, and long-term intervals goes a long way towards avoiding burnout.

## Closing Thoughts

I've tried to convey some of the strategies I've developed over the past three years to manage the stressors and uncertain events in my life, I hope that it acts as a useful foundation for you to develop some of your own strategies. Keep in mind that we are all unique individuals that respond differently in the face of adversity and if none of my strategies work for I would urge you to seek out additional perspective of others around you and others within the medical mentorship community. **There are so many perspectives available, and there are so many people out there willing to help, all you have to do is ask!**

