



Stanford eCorner

Who Needs Closure?

Olivia Fox Cabane, *Author and Speaker*

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Olivia Fox Cabane, co-author of “The Net and the Butterfly: The Art and Practice of Breakthrough Thinking,” talks about how people are uncomfortable with uncertainty because the brain perceives it in the same way as physical pain. She shares several ways to practice building up a tolerance for uncertainty in our everyday lives, explaining how crucial that trait is for generating more innovative ideas.



Transcript

is important and how you can go through it, et cetera. But the way we handle uncertainty is actually one of the biggest blockers on the road to breakthroughs. Have you ever had the feeling that you're, when you're waiting for a result, and the feeling that you'd rather even get bad news rather than just being left in suspense? That's our inability to deal with uncertainty. Why do we have this issue with uncertainty? It actually registers in the brain like physical pain. It's a tension, a gap that must be resolved before you can move forward. And just like with fear and failure, you can learn how to handle uncertainty. You can practice uncertainty, you can watch a horror movie or a mystery movie and stop before the end, and then just sit and see what's happening inside of you, and learn how to handle your feelings. There's a joke that meditators often say on retreat, which is, "Don't just do something, sit there." Often, just sitting there, not running away, not distracting yourself, is the most courageous thing you can do. You can also use sports games, you can go to a game, you can watch a game on television where you don't know the outcome because one of the things we love about games, by the way, and turn the television off, or leave the game, and then just handle the uncertainty. That's a good way to practice.

You can reduce the uncertainty by learning how to think like a poker player. My favorite is Annie Duke, she had a great website with lots and lots of tips on there, and she has books and courses. When you think like a poker player, you're always thinking in probabilities, And that can help you A, narrow down the range, but also realizing that there's never 100 percent or never a zero percent. When Annie first started dating her boyfriend, now fiance, they're all poker players, her, her brother, they're all champions and they've got the bracelets, et cetera, turns out that her family started making bets on whether they'd get married. And so they actually named the option after the couple. They think probabilistically about everything. So we talked about practicing, we've talked about reducing and the last one is balancing uncertainty. You'd be surprised by how many very, very creative artists designers, dancers, have taken their entire day and dropped into routine from morning to evening because we all have a certain threshold above which our brain goes into this fight or flight mode because there's too much uncertainty. So it's almost as if you have a bucket, a scale with a bucket of certainty on one hand and uncertainty on the other. You need uncertainty to have breakthroughs.

If you can't handle uncertainty, you'll only do things that are guaranteed to work. Therefore, that aren't innovative, that aren't new. If you load the certainty bucket with rituals, routines and habits as much as possible, then you can handle more uncertainty.