

## **#54: Uncertainty, Panic, and Fear**



### **Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host**

**Marissa McKool, MPH**

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## #54: Uncertainty, Panic, and Fear

Hey, you all, I'm Marissa McKool, and you're listening to the Redefining Rest Podcast for public health professionals. Here we believe rest is your right. You don't have to earn it, you just have to learn how to take it and I'm going to teach you. Ready? Come along.

Well, hello my friends, I'm so glad you're here. This podcast today is going to be really helpful for so many of you and really important for you to take some time to listen to and maybe even listen to more than once. And it will probably be an episode you'll come back to again and again. And it's a little intense. The good news is we're starting off with some positive news which is the winners of the Rest giveaway.

So, folks who are new, we were doing a giveaway during the month of April for the podcast. And we had nearly 100 entries and folks rated and reviewed the podcast and shared it broadly. And I've just been so touched and honored to read some of the comments, to hear from some of you, how the podcast is resonating. And that so many of you entered the Rest giveaway which tells me you all know and are showing up to take rest, to put rest first, to prioritize yourself.

All of you who entered should be so proud of yourself whether or not you are a winner because you entering, you doing that, sharing it, rating and reviewing was telling your brain and telling yourself, hey, brain, rest matters. We don't have to earn rest. We don't have to produce our way to rest, we can take rest. And I'm going to show you. I'm going to enter this and tell myself I deserve rest. And that's important. That action tells your brain that you are starting to think about rest differently.

And even if you're not a winner I want you to consider deciding to take some rest, whatever rest is for you right now. That could be going on a run. That could be taking a nap and anything in between. So, take it to the next step, you entered the giveaway and even if you don't win, take that action of getting rest, and following through on that. And telling your brain, hey,

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I'm serious, we're going to put rest first. We're going to prioritize ourselves. So, let's announce who won. I wish I could do drum rolls also in advance, apologies if I mispronounce anyone's name.

But the winners are Christie McClamrock, congratulations. You're going to be winning the \$150 spa gift card as well as Julia Chen, congrats to you, you're going to be winning the books, Burnout and Rest. And last but certainly not least, Kim Pi, you're going to be winning the Health Equity Matters sweatshirt. Congrats to the three of you. You will have an email in your inbox before 5:00pm Pacific Standard Time announcing your win, getting connected on what we need in order to get you those prizes.

I'm so happy for you. I'm so thankful to all of you for participating, for entering, thank you so much. And hopefully we'll have another giveaway coming up. So, with that let's get into the episode about uncertainty, panic, and fear. And I'm recording this on Tuesday May 3<sup>rd</sup>, this is being released on Monday May 9<sup>th</sup>. And this wasn't the original plan. I had a different episode going out but last night the new broke about Roe v. Wade opinion, it was leaked that there is a possibility or a very high likelihood that Roe v. Wade will be overturned.

Roe v. Wade is the law basically, without getting into details, with a case that has made abortion federally legal. And as many of you know, many politicians, many groups have been working ever since then to overturn it in a variety of different ways. I worked in reproductive health for a large majority of my public health career. And fighting against antiabortion efforts, misinformation, working to implement prevention, evaluate programs, thinking about policy. And I know many of you listening do that work right now or have in the past.

So last night it became linked, one of the justice's opinions, they're political, that it may be overturned. Now, as I'm recording this on Tuesday May 3<sup>rd</sup> it is not overturned. That was just leaked. The situation, the news, what has

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happened between today when I'm recording it in real time and when you're listening to this whether it's Monday May 9<sup>th</sup> or a different day, there might be some changes. But even if that is the case this will still be helpful, this episode will still be helpful.

And it will also be helpful whether or not you're in panic and fear over this circumstance, the Roe v. Wade or anything else in the future. You can come back to this episode whether you're in these emotions over an election, or the election of a specific leader, or a national crisis, whether environmental, or health, or a global crisis, or climate crisis, or a personal crisis. Essentially any time you are feeling panic and fear because of the uncertainty of the future as an outcome of a change in the circumstance.

And I'm going to use the Roe v. Wade as an example here because that is what's happening in real time right now. But you can swap out that circumstance for any other situation. So, the Roe v. Wade potentially being overturned is bringing up a lot of emotions. Uncertainty, feeling unknown about the future, the impact of the future, how it will impact you. How it will impact others you know, your community, people in general who can get pregnant, communities who are marginalized, folks who live in certain areas, in certain states. Maybe how it will impact your work, also panic.

Experiencing panic often comes from the experience of uncertainty, freaking out about the future, catastrophizing, worse case scenario, ruminating on all the negative scenarios. And then we can go into fear. The uncertainty and panic can lead us to fear and being afraid for ourselves and our safety or afraid for others and their safety. And all these emotions can get wrapped up into then feeling hopeless and despair.

Today we're going to talk about uncertainty, panic, and fear specifically because when those are activated you can't really address other emotions because you're in fright or flight. Or you're in your stress response, or your fear response. And your nervous system is activated, and your brain is

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freaking out. So, we have to start there. Of course, you might also be feeling other emotions, anger, sadness, shock, any other emotions. And let me be very clear, any emotion is a normal emotion. Any emotional response is a normal emotional response.

Even if you're feeling a little numb or apathetic, it doesn't mean anything is wrong with you. Sometimes we feel those emotions as a coping mechanism to the fear and stress response cycle being activated as a way not to overwhelm our nervous system. So, whatever you're feeling, that's okay, feelings, all emotions are a natural normal part of being a human. But we're going to talk about uncertainty, panic, and fear today because that means your nervous system is activated.

And the goal is for you to intake some of this information away that helps you reduce the activation, reduce some of the panic and fear, think about uncertainty a little bit differently. And so, then you can decide on purpose how you want to feel, what you want to think and how you want to show up. So, with uncertainty right now it might feel like a rug has been pulled out from under you. And now because of that everything feels uncertain like the ground you're walking on feels unstable.

You think because of this change in the circumstance, change in the policy or law, and what may or may not come of that change, you think because of that, that means now your future and the future of everyone else is uncertain. And our brains hate uncertainty. It feels very destabilizing. But here is the truth, the future was already uncertain before these leaked documents. The future is always uncertain. The change in law, or policy, or a circumstance does not create the uncertainty. This is really important.

What happens when a circumstance changes, when a law is overturned, when a natural disaster happens, when someone else is elected you didn't want to be elected, whatever it may be. When that happens, it does not create uncertainty. What it does is become a reminder that uncertainty

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already exists. It just brings up the fact, shows it to you right in front of your face that life is uncertain. It brings that truth to the forefront. It doesn't create that, doesn't create that truth, it doesn't cause uncertainty. It just shows you the fact that life is uncertain.

We were all just under the illusion, our brains were under the illusions because this law has been in place we could predict the future and that the future is not uncertain. We believe that because this law has been in place that means we know what the future will look like, and we can plan and see. And that gives us comfort. But the truth is we never had that certainty, the whole time the law has been in place. And as of today, when I'm recording this it's still in place.

As humans we spend a lot of time believing that we have certainty when we don't. That we have certainty about things that we don't. So of course, our brains freak out when we are reminded of the uncertainty of life, of the fact that there is so much out of our control, our direct control, our sole control. It is not that this moment in time is uncertain because of a potential overturn of a law. It is that every moment in life is uncertain, no matter the circumstance whether it stays the same or changes. That is the nature of life. That is the truth about life.

And when we are spinning in uncertainty and the realization that things are uncertain and believing it's because of external things changing we can go into panic. Panic happens when our brains start to swim in imagining the worst case scenario, ruminating, catastrophizing, picturing the worst possible outcome we focus on everything outside of our control. You're thinking about everything outside of your direct, complete, and sole control like other people, politicians, nature, the future. And this creates a spin of despair and dark tunnel vision.

Panic can happen but it doesn't have to. Panic gets you nowhere. It does not serve a purpose. It can feel purposeful but it's not. We tell ourselves we



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are planning for the worst case scenario by replaying those possibilities, by catastrophizing in our head. But what we are actually doing is reducing our ability to respond to any scenario, to any outcome because when we are in panic we cannot fully access our prefrontal cortex, the part of our brain where we can have strategic planning.

When we are in panic we cannot engage our primitive brain in case there is actual threat or danger to respond appropriately. Panic is the response to uncertainty because our brains want to feel in control and certain. And when we are reminded we're not in control of everything and life is uncertain and the future is always uncertain, our brain goes into overdrive trying to grasp on to get control and certainty.

But instead of focusing on where you actually have control your brain focuses on the future, not how you show up in the future, but how other people show up, how things change, what may or may not happen. And specifically negative and worst case scenarios. And your brain does this under the guise of planning for the worst, of being prepared. But you just need to know that the reason your brain is doing this, it's like your brain is in a pool, the pool of uncertainty, lots of water.

And your brain is believing you don't know how to swim and it's grasping for air, it's grasping to grab onto something. And what it's grabbing on to is worst case scenario and thinking about negative outcomes, and spinning and catastrophizing in rumination as a way to try to get control, to try to swim in the uncertainty. But it doesn't work. All it does is keep you stuck in unhelpful emotions. It doesn't give you control. It gives you the illusion of control but while you are in that illusion you feel completely out of control because you are.

You're not swimming in the water of uncertainty. You're grasping for air. You're panicking, you're flailing your arms, you're getting water in your ears, and your nose, and your mouth. And you're freaking out and you're

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making it so much harder for yourself to swim, to breathe, to flow, to ask for help, to get out of the pool, or whatever it may be. And nothing is wrong if you're having this experience. Panic is a part of life too. We can experience that. But it's important to understand what's actually happening and why you're experiencing it.

And when you experience the uncertainty and the panic, you can also experience fear. The change in the policy, the possibility or outcome of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned is a circumstance. The fear you are experiencing isn't because of that circumstance, because of the change of the circumstance. The fear you are experiencing is because of a thought or a set of thoughts you are having.

So, you might be thinking something along the lines of this is going to be disastrous. We're all fucked. The world is falling apart. Women are going to die. If I get pregnant I don't know what I will do. They're coming after women. We're losing all our rights. And probably a whole host of other thoughts. Those thoughts, that is what creates the fear. You have one or more of those thoughts and your brain tells your body, hey, we're in danger. And your body activates the fear response.

It does not mean you're actually in danger. This is a very, very, very important distinction. When you believe you are in danger, when you have thoughts that communicate to yourself that you are in danger, your body goes into the fear response. And when that happens it makes it very hard for you to self-soothe, strategically think, show up for yourself or others, ask for help, think intentionally, generate hope, generate empowerment. And you end up making the experience even harder for yourself.

The reason you feel afraid is because of whatever thought you are having, not because what has occurred in the world. *Roe v. Wade* potentially or being overturned is not what creates your fear. Your fear is created by your thought that you have about *Roe v. Wade* being overturned. This is really,



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really important because this is where all your power lies to be able to change your experience.

Your primitive brain, the part of your brain that has kept humans alive for thousands of years because it goes into the fear response and responds by fight, flight or freeze doesn't know the difference between actual physical danger in the moment and perceived danger based on your thoughts.

When you have a thought that tells your brain you are in danger, even if you are not physically in danger in this moment, your brain and body jump into action and set your fear response into motion.

And you think because you're having that reaction, because you are feeling the fear, then the danger must be real and imminent. Meaning you believe you are in danger and that again, intensifies the fear response. The fear you are having in your body is an emotional response to a thought or set of thoughts you are having. When you experience fear it does not mean you are in actual immediate physical danger. It's not a problem to feel fear or have it come up at all. Even if you aren't in physical danger and fear comes up, that doesn't mean it's a problem.

But what is making it a 'problem' for you is when you believe that emotion of fear coming up means you are not safe, you are in danger. That's when it becomes a problem because when you believe that, you cannot access the ability to comfort yourself, to believe in change, to empower yourself, to support yourself, to show up for yourself. Fear is just a physical sensation in the body like any other emotion created by your thoughts. The feeling of fear cannot hurt you but your reaction to the fear can make your experience either easier or harder.

Uncertainty, panic, and fear do not have to be the boss of you and your current experience. These emotions do not have to direct your response to whatever circumstance you are facing. These emotions are not a problem in the sense of they are natural normal responses. Natural and normal

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brain responses, emotional responses, all emotions are part of the human experience.

But your reaction to those emotions, to your circumstance, to your thoughts are creating a 'problem' for you because you are stuck in those emotions, and you cannot support yourself and others in the way that would be most helpful. Because when those emotions arise your reaction is, oh, shit, this must mean something terrible and you panic more and fear more, and swirl around more in uncertainty. And think more and more about worst case scenario, negative outcomes, why this is a problem. And you just get stuck in that thinking that is disempowering and not helpful.

That reaction to those emotions, to the circumstance you are facing is optional. The emotions of uncertainty, and panic, and fear are just your body's response to thoughts you are having about the circumstance. Those thoughts do not mean you're actually in physical danger. Those thoughts do not mean you have zero control in life. They are just sentences in your head. The emotions are just physical sensations in your body. This is not to minimize or dismiss the circumstance, in this case Roe v. Wade potentially being overturned and what may or may not come of it.

This is not turning a blind eye or pretending nothing will change and nothing will happen because of that change. This is to show you how your response to your emotions to the circumstance at hand is making it harder for you to show up and support yourself now. And will make it harder for you to show up and support yourself in the future no matter what happens. We cannot predict the present or the future. We never have been able to. It is a part of human life. We can't predict what other people will do, what they will say, how they will act.

Even though we have science we can't fully predict things like the weather, or the environment, or crises. We can't, that is just a fact. That fact doesn't change when policies change. That fact doesn't change when policies don't

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change. That is a fact that remains stable and static. That's a fact of life. But you always get to decide what you think, how you feel and how you show up no matter the circumstance.

What you have certainty about is that you get to decide how to think, how to feel and how to act no matter the circumstance, no matter what changes, no matter the challenges, no matter the barriers. No matter what that is what's in your control. That is what's certain. And that is where you can find the certainty and control your brain is desperately seeking and needing. When you're in that pool of uncertainty, right now you think you just got pushed into it. No, you've been in that pool. That pool is life.

And right now with the uncertainty, and panic, and fear, you're swashing around, forgetting how to swim, screaming, making it harder for yourself. When you focus back on where you have certainty and control which is how you think, how you feel, how you show up, you remember how to swim, how to tread the water, how to come up for air. Your brain is telling you that you need to find certainty and control outside of you. And that's what it continues and has been believing to find comfort.

And then what happens, something like Roe v. Wade might be overturned and you are reminded, you don't have certainty and control in everything, and your brain freaks out. You have to redirect your brain to the certainty and control you will always have and that is you, your decisions, your choices, how you decide to think, how you decide to feel. That's a 100% in your control. And that's what you can decide to be certain about. Maybe you focus on the fact that you can be certain that you will show up for yourself no matter what or that no matter what happens you will figure it out.

Or you can be certain that you can believe you can get through challenges that may or may not lie ahead. Maybe you believe you can be certain that you can allow any emotion or any other certainty about you and how you

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will show up and what you believe. It doesn't mean you have to think everything will be sunshine and rainbows and there no will be no harm and the world's at peace. No. But it also doesn't mean you have to think you're fucked, we're fucked, everything's going to die, the world's on fire, women are being attacked and all the other catastrophizing thoughts you're having.

Here is what's true for me no matter what. No matter if Roe v. Wade gets overturned, no matter if there's another public health crisis, no matter if there's another leader I don't support, elected, no matter what happens externally here is what I know. I know that I can allow any emotion. That my body is designed to process emotions. That I can choose to believe change is always possible. I know for a fact nothing is permanent which means change is always possible. I know that I can always manage my mind and I'm in charge of what I think.

I know that no matter what is 'given or taken' as far as rights or policies go, no one can take my ability to believe in what is possible. I know I can decide, and I do believe I am worthy and valuable no matter what a person, policy, or anyone else says. I know I can decide and do believe that everyone is worthy and valuable no matter what a person, policy, or anyone else says. I know I can figure out hard things. I can face challenges and make it through them. I can handle negative emotions in tough situations.

I know nothing lasts forever, including emotions and challenging times. I know that I will always support myself. What do you know about you, about your ability to believe, about what you can believe, about what you want to believe? What do you know about how you can show up for yourself, how you want to show up for yourself? What do you know about how you can allow emotions and what emotions you want to feel? What do you know about how you can support yourself and how you will do that?

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When you are in uncertainty, and panic, and fear, come back to those things. Connect with yourself and your body, question and challenge your brain's freakout thoughts. Consciously think intentional thoughts that serve you. It doesn't mean you have to think rainbow, and sunshine, and positive thoughts. No. But think thoughts that are helpful and what's helpful to you only you can decide. Come back to the truth that will remain no matter what.

That even though life is always uncertain, always, that is consistent, that's never going to change, you get to decide what to believe, how to feel and how to show up no matter the circumstance. And that is also the truth. That is also what's true. That also will never change. That is your life vest in this pool of life that is uncertain.

Okay, with that you all, I hope this week you find some time to support yourself in whatever you are facing. Love you all. See you next week.

If you found this episode helpful then you have to check out my coaching program where I provide you individualized support to create a life centered around rest. Head on over to [mckoolcoaching.com](http://mckoolcoaching.com), that's M-C-K-O-O-L coaching.com to learn more.