

Researchers find resilience to stress and uncertainty reduces disappointment

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Kate Sweeny

Uncertainty. It causes more anxiety and stress than facing difficult news, said Kate Sweeny, associate professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside. But is it possible to cope with distress during what could be a life-altering period of uncertainty?

"There are literally thousands of papers and dozens of books that address the processes of stress and coping in the face of a failure, yet so little

guidance is available to people as they wait to see if that setback will occur," Sweeny said.

Sweeny and a team of researchers tested two definitions of what she calls "waiting well" by studying the behavior of law graduates awaiting and receiving their results on the California Bar Examination. The first question was whether people can wait in a way that reduces [distress](#) during the waiting period. The second question was whether people can wait in a manner that eases the pain of bad news, or increases the thrill of [good news](#), after the news has been delivered.

Published in the journal *Emotion*, Sweeny discovered that people were largely unsuccessful at managing their distress during the waiting period, despite their best efforts. She also found that people who embraced an optimistic outlook and who experienced little anxiety during the time of uncertainty felt hopeless in the face of bad news, and were underwhelmed by good news. But participants who reported a particularly agonizing wait for their bar exam results got a boost when the news was good, and took less of a blow when the news was bad.

"Most coping strategies were ineffective for reducing distress associated with uncertainty – sometimes even backfiring," said Sweeny. "But thankfully, people who suffer through a period of [uncertainty](#) respond more productively to bad news, and more joyfully to good news."

More information: Kate Sweeny et al. Two Definitions of Waiting Well., *Emotion* (2015). [DOI: 10.1037/emo0000117](https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000117)

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