Fear, Worry, and Living With Uncertainty · About 4 minutes

Company Without a Promise That All Will Be Well

Asking for support when certainty is unavailable

What would help while the landlord is still deciding? “Stay on the phone while I eat,” she says.

That request asks for something a friend might honestly offer. “Promise me I won’t have to move” asks for certainty the friend does not possess.

Nia and Joel are fictional. She is waiting to hear whether her tenancy will be renewed. She has supplied the documents and checked the response date. He reminds her that the landlord has usually been reasonable. She thinks of another way it could go wrong. He supplies another reassuring argument. Before long, both are frustrated.

Housing insecurity is a real problem. Nia may need tenancy advice or help considering other arrangements. She might also want company while the answer remains unavailable. Being well informed and being accompanied meet different needs.

Why reassurance sometimes keeps the conversation going

One theory of persistent worry proposes that staying distressed can seem preferable to being surprised by a sudden increase in distress.[1] A person may feel that worrying keeps them ready. This is one possible account, not something to assume about Nia. The risk to her housing already gives us reason to take her concern seriously.

Even accurate reassurance may miss the question she is trying to ask. If what she wants is somebody who will remain present while she is afraid, another prediction can leave her alone with the feeling once more.

Relational support deserves consideration in its own right. In a small laboratory study, supportive handholding was associated with reduced threat-related responses in a particular group and setting.[2] That finding does not prescribe touch or tell us what will help Nia. It does challenge the assumption that needing another person is always a problem to outgrow.

Joel might say, “I can talk for ten minutes, then I need to collect my daughter.” Nia could welcome that, call another friend or decide she wants a different kind of help. He need not overstate his availability. She need not pretend ten minutes meets every part of the need.

They can also keep the practical problem separate enough to act on it. Is a response overdue? Does a letter need explaining? Is there a service that can advise her? Company need not displace those questions, and no single friend has to meet them all.

If you recognize the reassurance loop, consider what you are hoping the next answer will provide. More reliable information may be needed. Or you may want to say, “I’m still frightened. Could you listen without trying to settle it?” You can use Nia’s situation as the example rather than make a personal request.

The phone call gives Nia somewhere to bring her worry while the decision is still out of her hands.

The decision hasn't come. The food is warm, and there is somebody on the other end of the line.

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Companion reading · When Worry Becomes a Way of Caring

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Fear, Worry, and Living With Uncertainty (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Newman, M. G., & Llera, S. J. (2011). A novel theory of experiential avoidance in generalized anxiety disorder: A review and synthesis of research supporting a contrast avoidance model of worry. Clinical Psychology Review, 31(3), 371–382. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2011.01.008 Source.

[2] Coan, J. A., Schaefer, H. S., & Davidson, R. J. (2006). Lending a hand: Social regulation of the neural response to threat. Psychological Science, 17(12), 1032–1039. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01832.x Source.

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