

Why Do I Avoid Finding Out When I Think the Answer Might Be Bad?

There's an email sitting in your inbox.

You know you need to open it.

Maybe you're waiting for a decision. Maybe it's about money. Maybe it's a test result, an application, a problem at work or something else you've been worrying about.

You want to know.

But you also really don't want to know.

So you leave it.

Perhaps for ten minutes. Perhaps until later that evening. Sometimes for days. It might seem strange. If the answer is already there, surely finding out would be better than wondering?

Not always.

For a little while, not knowing can feel safer

When we're worried that something might be bad, uncertainty can create a strange little space between what we're afraid of and finding out whether it has actually happened. While we don't know, there is still another possibility.

The email might contain good news. The problem might not be as serious as we think. The person might not be upset with us. The answer might be okay.

Opening the email, checking the account or making the phone call ends that uncertainty. And sometimes we're simply not ready for that yet. So we tell ourselves:

I'll look later.

For a little while, we get some relief.

Except we don't really stop thinking about it

The problem with avoiding an answer is that we rarely forget we're waiting for it. We might be watching television, having dinner, working or doing something completely unrelated when it pops back into our mind.

I still need to check that.

Then comes the familiar feeling in the stomach. The anxiety. The temptation to put it away again. Sometimes the uncertainty we were using to protect ourselves becomes uncomfortable in its own right. We haven't received the bad news we're afraid of. But we haven't received reassurance either.

We're simply waiting.

Sometimes we're trying to choose when we deal with it

There can also be something about timing. Maybe you don't want to open a difficult email just before bed. Perhaps you don't want to make a phone call when you're already having a bad day. Sometimes we wait until we feel a little stronger, calmer or more able to deal with whatever comes next. That isn't necessarily avoidance.

There can be a difference between:

I'm choosing to deal with this tomorrow morning when I have the time and capacity.

and:

I keep telling myself I'll deal with it tomorrow because I'm frightened to find out.

The behaviour can look exactly the same from the outside. What is happening underneath may be very different.

Knowing doesn't create the answer

There's an uncomfortable truth in all of this. Whatever the answer is, it already exists whether we look at it or not. Not opening the email doesn't change what it says. Not checking the balance doesn't change the number. Not making the phone call doesn't change the situation we're calling about. Sometimes that thought can actually help. Instead of:

What if I find out something bad?

we might begin to think:

If there is something difficult to deal with, knowing means I can begin dealing with it.

That doesn't make bad news pleasant. It simply moves us from imagining what might be happening to responding to what actually is.

But that doesn't mean you have to be fearless

Sometimes we talk about facing things as though the goal is to stop being anxious first. It often doesn't work like that.

You can open the email while feeling nervous.

You can make the call while wishing you didn't have to.

You can check the result and still need a minute afterwards.

Courage isn't always a dramatic act. Sometimes it's clicking **open**.

 **Therapist's Reflection:** I think there's something very human about wanting to delay information we fear might hurt us. For a little while, not knowing allows us to stay in the place where things might still be okay.

But uncertainty has a cost too.

We can spend hours or days imagining possibilities, rehearsing bad outcomes and carrying around something we haven't even confirmed is true.

And eventually I come back to a fairly simple thought:

What is going to happen will happen.

Finding out doesn't create the outcome. It simply gives us the opportunity to respond to what is actually there. So perhaps the question isn't always:

Why am I avoiding this?

Sometimes it might be:

What do I think knowing will make me feel — and what might help me feel able to face that?

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