



My grandfather, Emil Seletz, was a neurosurgeon and sculptor known for his busts of Abraham Lincoln, which now stand in courthouses, universities and museums, including Ford's Theatre. When I was young, I remember him trying to teach me to mold the unwieldy clay he used in his work. But I didn't have the patience for the stiff clay and quickly gave up, preferring to sculpt in Play-Doh, which ended up in the trash.

Now, as a clinical psychologist, I see so many clients who don't have the ability to wait, and it is no wonder. In a world where it is possible to get the answer to any question instantly with Google and to order coffee for immediate pickup on an app, why should any of us have to deal with delays and unknowns?

For one thing, learning how to wait is good for us in a number of ways. Since missing my priceless opportunity to learn to sculpt, I've come to appreciate that psychological flexibility—being open to and able to tolerate the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that often arise when we face delays and setbacks—is an essential ingredient when it comes to mental health. Studies also suggest that the ability to wait and accept uncertainty is connected with a willingness to pursue larger incentives.

For many of us, the challenge is that being patient now feels harder than ever before. "We're not getting the same opportunities to practice waiting as we used to," says **Michel Dugas, a professor of psychology at the University of Québec.**

A 2023 study involving more than 28,000 adults and adolescents found that the average person's mood got steadily worse every minute they sat doing nothing. "We

hypothesize that mood drift is related to the rate of happy events you have come to expect in your life. If you're waiting, you can't go out and get those rewards," explained David Jangraw, an assistant professor at the University of Vermont, who led the study.

Waiting patiently is so difficult that we often react by doing things that actually make us more impatient, like constantly checking our phones for updates or seeking reassurance from everyone we know. "Technology creates the illusion that certainty is possible, which leads to trying to attain certainty in all situations, contributing to worry and anxiety," says Dugas. When a loved one doesn't pick up the phone, we track their location instead of waiting for them to call back; when an email doesn't get a prompt response, we can find out precisely when it was opened. Such behavior, says Dugas, only adds to our worry and anxiety.

But it is possible to cultivate patience—the ability to regulate your emotions in the face of delays, frustration, adversity and suffering. The first step is learning to view waiting as a positive activity rather than something to avoid at all costs. "Waiting has come to imply suffering or a failure to adopt the appropriate technology," says Sarah Schnitker, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Baylor University. A better way to look at patience, says Schnitker, who leads the school's Science of Virtues Lab, is "the sweet spot where you feel calm but still engaged in pursuing the important things in life."

Waiting may feel painful at first, particularly for people predisposed to seeking control. But almost anyone can learn to strengthen their ability to wait.

It all starts with pausing and identifying or noticing your impatience, says Schnitker. Then you can try to think about your situation in a new way. For instance, if you're annoyed that you have to spend a lot of time training a new colleague, reframe the task as a chance to strengthen your prowess as a leader.

You can also connect your actions with your values or a larger sense of purpose, like making it your mission to spread kindness, which will make it easier to stay calm with your children during the morning rush, or to be polite to someone trying their best in customer service.

Another strategy comes from an evidence-based treatment called Radically Open Dialectical Behavior Therapy, developed by Thomas Lynch, a professor emeritus at the University of Southampton in the U.K. When you're feeling frustrated and impatient, ask yourself, "Is there something here that I might need to learn?" The goal is to allow the situation to unfold, with the understanding that these moments of self-inquiry offer opportunities for growth, explain Lynch and his wife, Erica Smith-Lynch, who trains therapists in the approach.

One of the most effective ways to change is to seek out challenges that provoke impatience, giving you an opportunity to practice waiting. That could mean deciding not to check your work emails on a Saturday, or calling for non-vital medical test results a day after they become available, instead of right away. “Sometimes the point is to just sit with the uncertainty and see what that feels like,” Dugas says.

Since it is hard to summon patience on demand, practicing meditation, even for a few minutes a day, is another time-tested way to confront your expectations and learn to let go, according to Sharon Salzberg, the author of “Real Life: The Journey from Isolation to Openness and Freedom.”

In my own experience, I’ve found that deliberately slowing my breathing, loosening my grip and relaxing my face can help counter impatience—for instance, when I’m sitting in traffic. When it comes to more significant setbacks, I remind myself of something Salzberg teaches and often considers herself.

“There are so many times in my life where I think nothing’s happening for me,” says Salzberg. “Then I look back and say, ‘Oh how about that, I was actually planting a seed that I couldn’t have guessed.’ So sometimes I just remind myself that even if I don’t know what it is right now, there is a bigger picture.”

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