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Being Comfortable with Uncertainty

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We find ourselves in strange and uncertain times we could never have predicted. Futures were looking good, milk prices were on the rise, spring was on its way after a wishy-washy winter that never really gave us too much trouble. And then, enter COVID-19.

Every industry magazine and professional has no doubt bombarded you with strategies to meet your base, manage your milk flow, and plan for your businesses in uncertain climates. I'm not going to reinvent that wheel – though I will leave links at the end to my favorite resources on this topic. Since this is my last newsletter with NWVA, it's my last time to give you the "softer side of Sears" as it relates to these strange times. In a moment when everything is so uncertain, how can we be comfortable with the not knowing how it'll all turn out?

I am not comfortable with uncertainty. I love calendars and to-do lists and organizing my life. I like the feeling of agency - that there are places in which I can exert control and make what I want happen. Turns out this is normal. Psychologists study this kind of thing in research trials I would never want to join. In one such study that sticks out from my research on the subject, participants were told they were either definitely going to get an electrical shock or that they had a 50/50 chance of receiving one. Those that knew for sure they were going to be shocked experienced less anxiety and fear than those told they had a 50% chance of not getting shocked. Uncertainty is more stressful than actual pain, because pain we understand, can prepare for, can protect ourselves from.

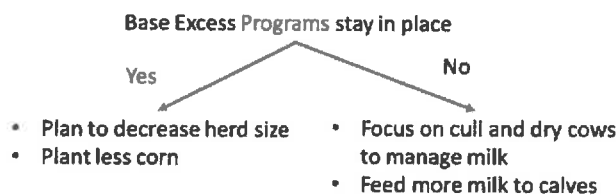
There are ancient parts of our brain – psychologists call it the "monkey" or "lizard" brain – that are wired to protect us from harm. Daily, that part of us scans the world looking for signs of trouble so we can quickly take action against it. When the trouble is a bear chasing us in the woods, the action is clear. When the trouble is less identifiable – say a virus that can't be seen or a huge crisis in our businesses – our brain writes a story about the threat to help understand it because the not knowing itself is perceived as dangerous. "We are all going to die from coronavirus so I shouldn't leave the house, it's not safe." Or "Milk prices are never going to recover from this, the world is out to get me, how am I ever going to make this work?" Our brains write stories to give ourselves the clarity we crave so we know how to protect ourselves from the harm we can't see. There is a pretty big problem with this psychological default however. These stories tend to always assume the worst, take everything personally and, most importantly, they are always wrong. Because the truth is, we can't know the future. We can't know what is going to happen with the dairy industry, the corona virus or the murder hornets (really world, did we need these too??). So how do we cope with uncertainty?

The first step seems so basic, so fundamental, that you'll want to shout at me, "Duh, Liz," and yet, it's something we often overlook: Acknowledge that this is hard. All of this - milk prices, pandemic, economic depression, division in the world, separation from those we love - is HARD. The optimists among us like to pull themselves up by their boot straps, throw on a happy face and maybe a cute mask that declares, "Everything is going to be ok!" The pessimists sometimes land on the other side of that fence, catastrophizing the worst (that's me most

days). Neither is a great place to live. Acknowledging that you are living through impossibly hard times gives your brain the chance to stop trying to FIX it. You don't have to make yourself feel better about it, but neither do you need to wallow in the ditch.

Next, see the stories you tell yourself for what they are – your monkey brain's attempt at protecting you from harm. Try to notice when you are swinging from the vines in story land and ask yourself, "Is this story true?" If the answer is yes, then great – proceed with panic or worry or unshakeable optimism. If the answer is no, treat your brain like a boss cow or an assertive salesman that shows up in the dooryard. You don't have to engage, you don't have to listen, you don't have to buy it. Instead, turn to things you know to be true. For example, you need toilet paper. Your kids need to finish their 72nd worksheet. You need to find four cows to send for beef and ten to dry off early to drop the bulk tank. Focusing on the true facts will trick your brain into thinking you have certainty and silence the stories for a moment.

There are some things we really can't drill down to concrete facts, however, things that will continue to remain uncertain. How long will the world be shut down? How long will school be out of session? How long will cooperatives enforce base excess programs? For these existential big-ticket items, one strategy is to map out a flow chart of possible scenarios. Remember those "choose your own adventure" books from the '80s? (Bobby is in a dark cave and hears a noise. If he heads to investigate, turn to page 40. If he runs for the hills, turn to page 15.) You can do the same thing with these big uncertainties in your life. Plan out different possible strategies for each uncertain scenario like the hypothetical example below. You won't actually be any more certain how things are going to go, but the planning process will trick your brain into thinking you are. And you will feel more prepared to face whatever comes next.



I've been using all three of these strategies to deal with the uncertainties of my life. It doesn't take away all of the panic, but I can tell you it does take the edge off better than any of the other possibly less healthy coping strategies I might be inclined to try. I can also tell you I have never met a stronger, more resilient group of people in my life than Northeast dairy farmers. You have faced storms before and I know (for certain) you will weather this one. It has been my honor to serve you these last five years and I will miss you all greatly. Please keep in touch – ehbrock27@gmail.com or find me on facebook (Elizabeth Brock). Thank you for letting me be part of your lives and for humoring my unique newsletter topics.

Resources for managing your milk and your business in COVID-19 uncertainty:

<https://prodairy.cals.cornell.edu/publications/covid-19/>

<https://hoards.com/article-27761-dairy livestream-april-29-2020.html>

<https://www.progressivedairy.com/topics/management/5-strategies-to-decrease-milk-production>

<https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/news/2020/04/15/managing-covid-19-instigated-risk/>