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# Embracing Ambiguity in Nursing



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## Objectives

- Explore ambiguity and one's reactions to ambiguity in life, healthcare, and nursing
- Reflect on the challenges of ambiguity in nursing and healthcare
- Explore the benefits of welcoming ambiguity
- Discuss strategies to embrace ambiguity in nursing



Hill, W. E. (1915) *My wife and my mother-in-law. They are both in this picture - find them / W.E.H. 15. , 1915. November 6. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010652001/>.*

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## Ambiguity in your life

- Polling- Tolerance for Ambiguity Scale (TAS)  
Herman, Stevens, Bird, Mendenhall, & Oddou
- Self-Scoring
- 12 questions
- Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree



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## 1. I avoid settings where people don't share my values

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
5	4	3	2	1



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## 2. I can enjoy being with people whose values are very different from mine.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1	2	3	4	5



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3. I would like to live in a foreign country for a while.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1	2	3	4	5



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4. I like to surround myself with things that are familiar to me.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
5	4	3	2	1



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5. The sooner we all acquire similar values and ideals the better.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>



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6. I can be comfortable with nearly all kinds of people.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>



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7. If given a choice, I will usually visit a foreign country rather than vacation at home.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1	2	3	4	5



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8. A good teacher is one who makes you wonder about your way of looking at things.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
1	2	3	4	5



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9. A good job is one where what is to be done and how it is to be done are always clear.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
5	4	3	2	1



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10. A person who leads an even, regular life in which few surprises or unexpected happenings arise really has a lot to be grateful for.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
5	4	3	2	1



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11. What we are used to is always preferable to what is unfamiliar.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
5	4	3	2	1



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12. I like parties where I know most of the people more than ones where all or most of the people are complete strangers.

<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
5	4	3	2	1



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## Scores 12- 60

**12-24?**

**25-40?**

**41-60?**



The higher the score, the more tolerant of ambiguity you are.

The lower the score, the more intolerant of ambiguity you are.



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## Definitions of Ambiguity

-the quality of being open to more than one interpretation; inexactness.

Dictionary.com

.capable of being understood in two or more possible senses or ways

Merriam-Webster

-having more than one interpretation

-having more than one direction

Medical dictionary.com



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## In what we see.....

Gender  
Ethnicity  
Student applicants

Environmental changes  
Financial security

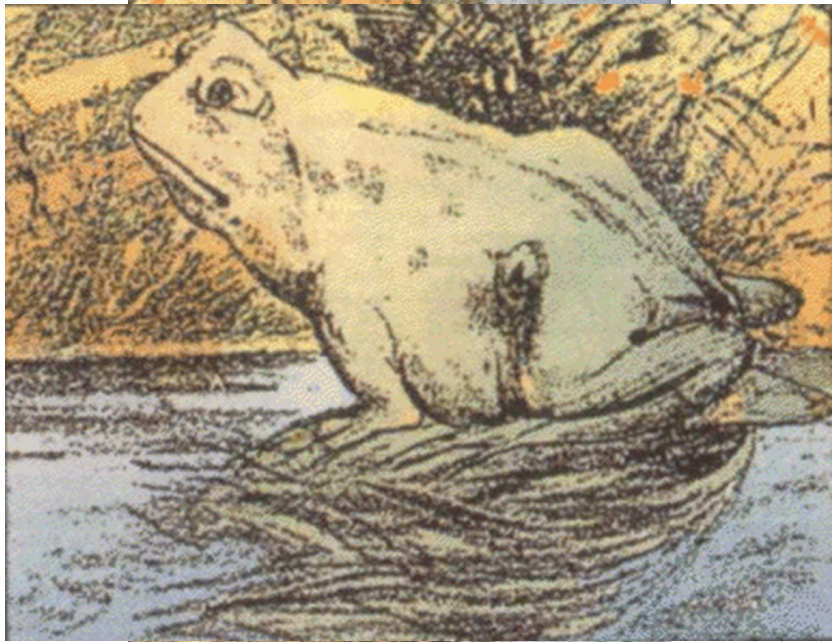


Image 1 [Fliegende Blatter](#)

Image 2: [Simon/ Mind Journal](#)

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## In what we say, hear, and read.....

- “Each of us saw her duck”.
- “The bandage was wound around the wound”.
- “A good life depends on the liver”.



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## In what we think.....

- Code status for a cancer patient
- Life expectancy for a patient with HIV
- Fear of not having an answer to a patient question

**DO NOT  
RESUSCITATE**



???????

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- Intolerance of ambiguity is “the tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as sources of threat” and tolerance of ambiguity as the tendency to “perceive ambiguous situations as desirable”
- Tolerance of ambiguity has been associated with several positive traits, such as originality and openness to new ideas



Measuring the ambiguity tolerance of medical students: a cross-sectional study from the first to sixth academic years

Weissenstein, et al, 2014

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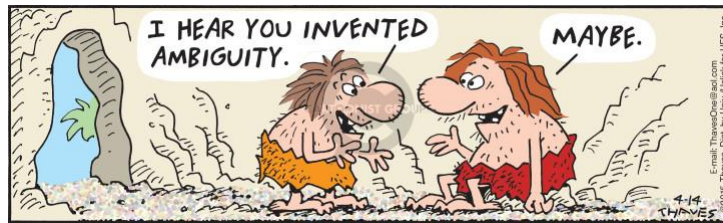
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- “Ambiguity is an underappreciated component in the practice and teaching of medicine that is perpetuated by its significant absence in our medical curricula and that an understanding of the ethics of ambiguity.” Domen, 2016
- Nursing curricula often focuses on the facts and the known processes for care, as the unknown adds frustration.



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## Examples of Ambiguity in Medicine (Domen, 2016)

### Diagnosis (patient or client)

- No or poor diagnostic tests
- Overutilization/underutilization of diagnostic tests
- Clarity is often missing
- Often no single answer



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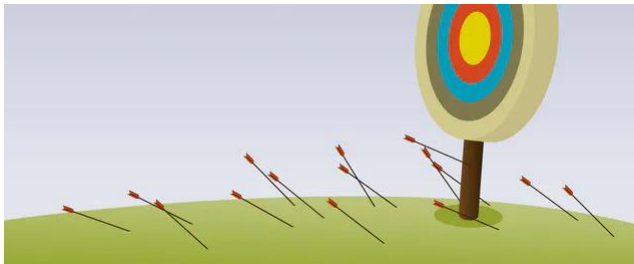
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## Treatment (patient/disease)

- No effective or less than ideal therapies
- Measures of efficacy can be elusive
- Treatment interactions and side effects
- Ineffective or conflicted patient-centered care/shared decision-making



Domen, 2016

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## Outcome (patient)

- Lack of appreciation for the biocultural impact on health
- Future is unknowable
- Ineffective or conflicted patient-centered care/shared decision-making
- Conflicted moral and ethical pressures to restore health
- Satisfaction not always achieved



Domen, 2016



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## Education

- Inability to know everything in conjunction with exponential growth of knowledge
- Impact on critical thinking skill
- Questions with no definitive answers
- Tolerance levels of uncertainty are variable
- Ineffective teacher–student relationships
- Ineffective community relationships



Domen, 2016

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## Research

- Increased moral and ethical pressures to seek answers
- More questions and uncertainty are created



Domen, 2016

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## Personal (practicing physician, resident, and student)

- Increased disillusionment with medicine
- Frustration and feelings of lack of control
- Influences choice of specialty practice
- Adverse attitudes toward underserved and marginalized groups
- Conflicted risk versus benefit consideration in research trials
- Decreased respect and tolerance toward others
- Ineffective teacher–student relationships
- Difficult decisions and creative thinking are often required
- Experience and insight are often required
- Adverse effect on character traits (honesty, respect, empathy, humility, etc)
- Ineffective patient-centered care/shared decision-making



Domen, 2016

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## Health-care organizations

- Ineffective patient-centered care
  - Adverse financial impact (eg, overutilization/under-utilization of diagnostic tests, increased time to diagnosis, increased patient dissatisfaction, etc)
- Ineffective community relationships
- Often requires difficult culture change(s)
- Requires managing change from within and without



Domen, 2016

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## In all these areas.....

Ambiguity in the workplace is:

- Being asked to do something that is not in your job description or that requires a skill that is new to you
- Relying on someone else to complete a task before you can proceed with your work
- Trying something new without knowing it will be successful
- Not having all the details or instructions that you would prefer
- Not getting the results you are accustomed to

Gendron, 2022



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## Embracing Ambiguity

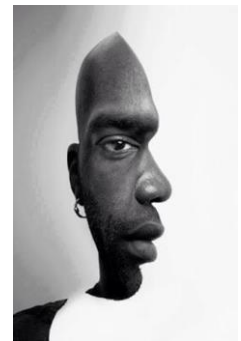
### Definition

- Can effectively cope with change; can shift gears comfortably; can decide and act without having the total picture; can comfortably handle risk and uncertainty.

**Key Words:** Adaptable, Flexible, Comfortable with Uncertainty

### Behavioral Indicators:

1. Embraces change; Anticipates and prepares for change
2. Develops new procedures in response to change
3. Proactively adapts to new opportunities or risks
4. Flourishes in high-change environments



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## Strategies to embrace ambiguity



1. Place self in experiences that are unfamiliar and outside your normal areas of expertise.
2. Keep a lookout for what you are noticing about the situation.
3. Build in time to pause to think and reflect about what you are learning.
4. Make sure you master the learning.

Young, 2015



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## Other ideas....

- Learn to act without knowing all the details
- Confidently take risks
- Plan for different scenarios
- Communicate clearly
- Embrace the Change!!

Gendron, 2022

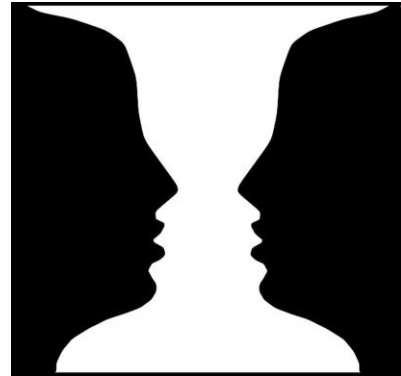


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## Questions....



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## References continued

- TEDx Talks
  - Uncertainty Tolerated: The Surprising Clarity when Managing Ambiguity by Cyrus Aram <https://youtu.be/dCSZH79oqzA>
  - Dealing with uncertainty by Caspar Berry <https://youtu.be/kKy26jP7jUc>
  - How to navigate our uncertain future by April Rinne <https://youtu.be/mlzyH8kodCs>



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