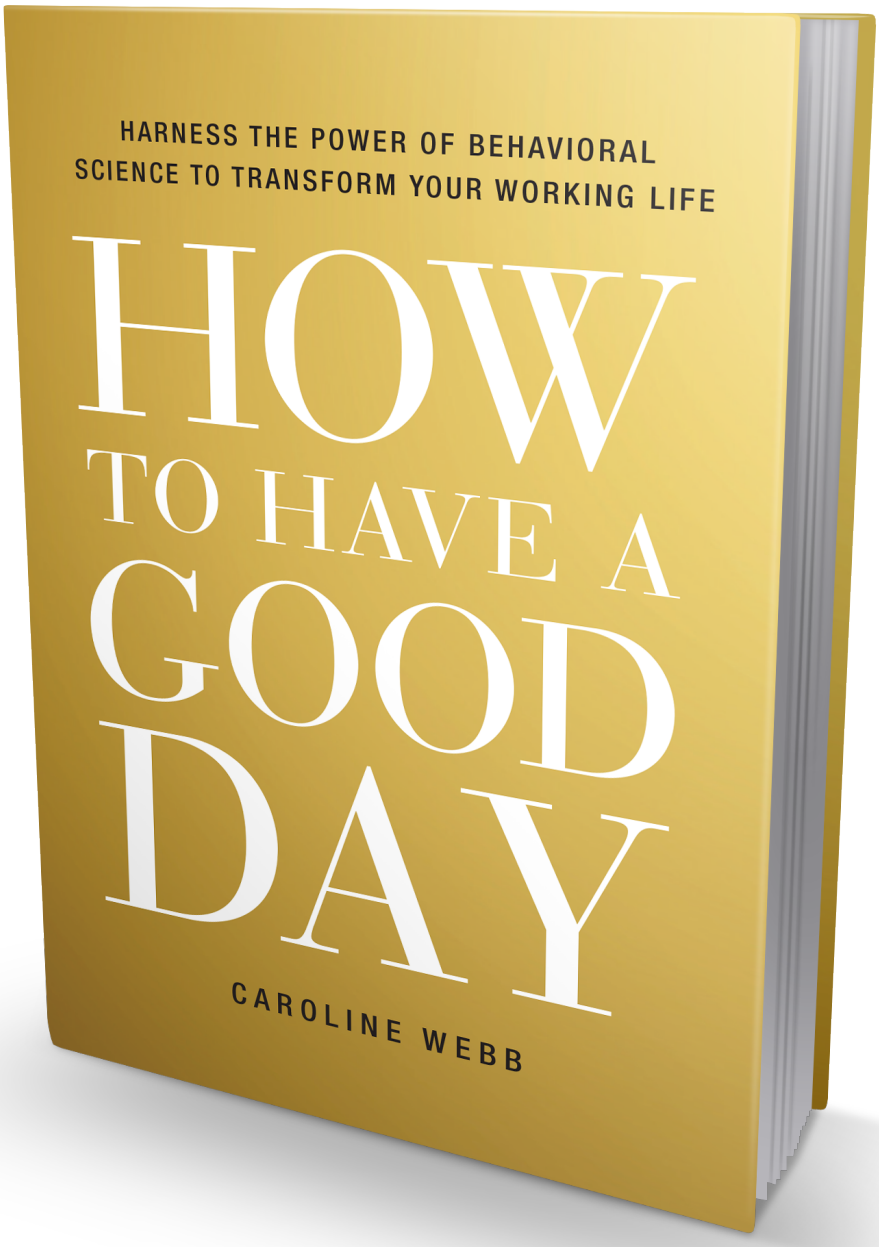
Excerpt from **How To Have A Good Day**



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a point where there were 'oh my gosh' moments every single day, men-tally and emotionally. The issues we were uncovering were so complex, much worse than I'd realized. The number of hours I was working, the intellectual challenge of figuring out what to do—it was immense." To get through this period, he used pretty much all the tools I've discussed in this book, but one that he used every single day was his diaphrag-matic breathing technique. He says: "My team asked me how I was keeping so calm in the face of everything," he says. "So I showed them what I did. I told them first to tune in to hearing their own breath, and then to start breathing slowly and deeply. I told them that if they could also close their eyes and relax their body, starting from toes upward, without trying to control their thoughts, they were basically doing a simple mindfulness exercise. And you can do the breathing part of it on a train, in a conference room, wherever."

My work rarely involves the kind of drama that Nayan was experiencing. But like him, I use the belly breathing technique almost every day, since I've found it keeps me serene when I'm facing travel delays or overcrowded streets. (And for those of you concerned about looking less than svelte as you fill your lungs: if you sit or stand up straighter so that you lengthen your torso as you breathe in, I've found that nobody can see you doing it.) It so quickly neutralizes irritation that I can't help wondering whether there should be billboards suggesting people try it before getting into their cars or onto mass transit. Meanwhile, I hope it improves your own commute.

MASTER THE UNKNOWN

Our workplaces are full of uncertainties. Will you sell enough this month to make your target? Will you manage to win that big pro-motion or charm that new client? What did the CEO mean when he talked about the need to "find efficiencies"? While it's no fun to have bad things happen, our brain finds negative uncertainty as stressful as actual negative outcomes, and we'll seek to avoid it if we can.

Take this example, where you have to choose between two options. You can either be given $30 cash in hand or you can take a gamble where you have an 80 percent chance of winning $45 and a 20 percent chance of winning nothing. Which would you prefer? The second op-tion is objectively more lucrative, since it yields an average expected

gain of $36. But if you'd feel happier with the first option, you're not alone; most people agree with you. It's a phenomenon known to behavioral scientists as the *certainty effect*.[12]

Why do we prefer to avoid situations where we lack information? One reason is that they make our brain work especially hard, as we're forced to assess many possible scenarios—and we know how much our brain's automatic system likes to save us mental energy. Not knowing what's going on also makes us more sensitive to negative experiences; it seems to enhance the sense of threat. For example, in a study at the Wellcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging in the UK, researchers found that people rated an unpleasantly hot panel as being markedly more painful to touch when they had less idea of the temperature they were about to experience.[13]

And yet sometimes we appear to enjoy uncertainty. We devour TV programs and movies that build suspense and keep us guessing. Research tells us that babies in every culture enjoy the game of peekaboo, where a person's face is revealed in front of them at unpredictable intervals.[14] But what's striking about the uncertainty we enjoy is that it's *bounded*. It's only about specific, defined elements of the situation. For example, when we read or watch a good thriller, there's plenty the writer has made sure we don't know—but we *do* know that all will be resolved within a countable number of hours, and we know that nothing life-changing is going to happen to us as a result of the surprise ending. And, as it turns out, the same is true for those small babies playing peekaboo. They only find it fun when there are some things they can rely on—that the person who hides is the same one who comes back, in roughly the same location. When someone new appears, or the person pops up in a completely different place, researchers have found that babies don't laugh nearly as much.[15]

That gives us the clue to weathering stressful periods of uncertainty. The more we place boundaries on the uncertainty—by acknowledging what we know for certain—the more manageable the remaining ambiguity feels to our brains. That in turn reduces the state of alert in our brains, allowing us to make wiser decisions about what we do next.

And however turbulent our situation, there are always *some* things that we can pin down. In the middle of a crisis, we can highlight the parts of our work that remain untouched by the upheaval. In the areas that are in disarray, we might realize we've got a good sense of how 80 percent of the situation will turn out. We can articulate and plan

for possible scenarios for the 20 percent, and we might at least be able to find out *when* the uncertainty will be resolved. Also, we control our own personal response to the situation: what we choose to say, do, or feel about it. Research suggests that this approach—focusing on what we control rather than what's being imposed on us—can even help people be more resilient when dealing with highly stressful and chaotic situations like military combat and natural disasters.[16]

That was borne out by the experience of Jacquie, a college PR officer, who had to cope with a deadly earthquake that struck her New Zealand town in 2011. Jacquie was the media contact for the college, and journalists from around the world descended upon her while she and her colleagues were coping with chaos. Her team was trying to figure out what to do without power and water, while not knowing when the next aftershock was coming or even how their loved ones had fared.

Amid all that, Jacquie found it helpful to focus her attention on a few familiar and controllable things. First of all, she looked for connections to things she knew. For example, she quickly came to see that "making progress was still all about relationships—helping others cope under pressure, building trust with the media, giving people some optimism where possible, and being kind to one another." These were things she knew she was good at, even if the context was entirely unfamiliar. She also decided to see it as "the most profound professional development opportunity I'd ever have. I thought, 'If I can handle this, I can handle any crisis.' "

Focusing on those two small islands of certainty—her skills and her attitude—boosted Jacquie's resourcefulness and resilience through the difficult days and months that followed. With many buildings damaged, the college held a celebration for its graduating seniors in huge tents on campus, and Jacquie ensured that this precious "good news story" received national media coverage. It was seen as a remarkable triumph for the whole community. And at the end of it all, Jacquie and her colleagues won a much-deserved industry award for their post-earthquake work.

Try this approach for yourself when you're dealing with an uncertain situation, by asking these clarity-restoring questions:

➨ "Setting aside the things I don't know, what are the things I *do* know?"

➨ "What is there that's familiar to me, given my past experience?"

- "What is mine to shape or control in this situation?" (For example: "What attitude do I want to have about this?" "What do I choose to learn from this?")

- "What are some possible future scenarios?" (Include the best case, the worst case, and some variation on the extremes.) "What would I do in each of those scenarios?"

- "What are some 'no regrets' actions that I know I can take?"

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How to Have a Good Day is a smart, thorough, and eminently practical book. Just about every page offers a science-based tip to help you become better off — or, in many cases, just plain better.

Daniel H. Pink, Author of When and Drive

About Caroline Webb

Caroline Webb is an executive coach, author and speaker known for being one of the world's leading experts in using insights from behavioral science to improve professional life. Her bestselling book on that topic, How To Have A Good Day, has been published in 14 languages and more than 60 countries. She is also a Senior Advisor to McKinsey, where she was previously a Partner.

Tune in to Caroline's live video series:
How To Have A Good Day In Uncertain Times
Wednesdays at 10am ET on **LinkedIn Live**

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