

dear residents

How to Thrive in Uncertain Times

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Dear Residents,

I have had my share of periods of both personal and collective uncertainty. My father always spoke about the experience of attending medical school during World War II when it seemed that the world as he and his contemporaries knew it was unravelling. The first significant period of uncertainty I faced was the overthrow of the democratic government by a [military coup in Pakistan in 1977](#). It was my senior year in high school. I was on the precipice of the next step in my education, and it seemed that the path of higher education was about to be undone. Matching to residency in the US also followed a period of the kind of anxious uncertainty that accompanies a high-stakes situation (The NRMP Match). Our first daughter's low Apgar score was another worrying time as was waiting in line outside the US Embassy in Ciudad Juarez at 2 AM not knowing if I would get a visa to reenter the US.

Thriving in uncertain times can seem like a non sequitur. But it can be done, and it has been done. Each of you has likely faced similar situations before. All of you have traversed distinct pathways to residency training and have experienced some hurdles or periods of uncertainty along the way. I doubt that any single person has simply sailed through from birth to the present unscathed and unencumbered. What follows are some personal views of how I have thrived in uncertain times.

Belief in oneself: Attending medical school in Karachi during a period of civil unrest, I was aware of the expertise around me. However, I recognized that I alone knew what truly mattered to me, my core values, and that it was my responsibility to find ways to express and reconcile these values with evolving circumstances. Herminia Ibarra aptly describes this phenomenon as the [authenticity paradox](#). She questions the concept of "true self" and challenges the notion of "being true to oneself," prompting us to consider which "self" we are referring to. My interpretation is that one can remain steadfast in their core values while simultaneously maintaining sufficient adaptability to flex and respond to emerging changes without compromising their fundamental beliefs. An analogy that resonates with me is that of an oak tree with a broad trunk and deeply rooted foundations. This tree allows its branches to sway gracefully with the prevailing wind, while its leaves turn towards the sun, demonstrating the ability to adapt and respond to changing circumstances without abandoning its core beliefs.

Honor the *why*: We each have our own *why* for pursuing this profession. That doesn't change. We need to adapt and flex but we don't need to surrender the *why*. For me: the pursuit of the greater good through the scientific method is the key to enabling the best life for the greatest number of people.

Remember that you are not alone: Much more unites us than divides us. As an international medical graduate living in the US for the first time, I was prepared to feel isolated and alone. But what I found instead was a welcoming group of fellow residents – it turned out that we were all from Gray’s Anatomy and from Robbins’s Pathology and not that different after all. In no time, I had fully integrated with my new community. [Anthropologists](#) have identified 7 common themes in all societies that form a universal moral code of sorts. These are:

- Allocation of Resources to Kin (Family Values)
- Coordination to Mutual Advantage (Group Loyalty)
- Social Exchange (Reciprocity)
- Contests between Hawks (Bravery) and Doves (Respect)
- Division (Fairness)
- Possession (Property Rights)

Reconcile with the worst possible outcome: August 30, 1995, at 2 AM standing in a long line on the streets of Ciudad Juarez was eerie. The US embassy was to open at 7 AM. I had been forewarned that not everyone would be accommodated. As luck would have it, I was among the last group that got to speak to a consulate officer that morning. A few hours later my passport had been stamped, and I was in the clear to walk across the bridge to El Paso. But in those hours between 2 AM and 7 AM, I had already devised a plan to find a flight to Karachi and take my chances there. Having envisioned the worst possible outcome (denied a visa), I retained the glimmer of hope for the best possible outcome. That evening, I was back in Dallas.

Care for others: In uncertain times, personal survival instincts can take over. It’s important to remember that group loyalty, reciprocity and cooperation are the pathways to overcome any challenge. Listen to yourself and lead from within, but don’t lose sight of the collective advantage of pulling together in the same direction.

We are a marvelous community at UT Southwestern resplendent with a rich tapestry of our personal journeys that have led us to this place. We are united through our mission to apply ourselves in the best possible way to achieve the best outcomes for the greatest number of people.

The cold spell is relenting – there are brighter days ahead.



Photo by [Zhen Yao](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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