

PUBLICATION

BakerWell Corner: The Gift I Never Asked For

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By Tina Stoyka

I'm just going to come right out with it. Something no psychologist, psychiatrist, researcher, professor, author, or speaker ever says. Something many behavioral-health specialists dance around. It's simple, really. I didn't fully grasp it until year four of my own mental-health journey – and honestly, not until after I started Hang on Health – but once I saw it, it was obvious.

Despite the widespread belief that mental-health struggles stem primarily from trauma, the deeper, more universal root is uncertainty. That's it. Uncertainty.

Think about it. Whether you've lived through past trauma, are navigating something hard right now, feel unsettled by the world, or are gearing up for the future-defining trial of your career – your stress, anxiety, and worry all trace back to the same place: uncertainty.

Uncertainty – the "what ifs?", the "what happens now?", all the unanswered questions, and the confusion – shapes everything. It shapes your behavior. The decisions you make (or avoid). Your trust in others, and in yourself. And ultimately, your future.

Once you start seeing how uncertainty shows up everywhere, you begin to realize something else: you're surrounded by other people – colleagues, clients, friends – battling the exact same thing, even if they never talk about it.

A 2024 study conducted by Mental Health America found:

- 78 percent of workers are impacted by stress.
- 70 percent find it difficult to concentrate at work.
- 85 percent+ feel emotionally drained by their jobs.
- 80 percent say work stress affects their relationships with friends, family, and co-workers.

Unfortunately, I'm included in each of those statistics. In the summer of 2020, I decided to launch my own growth consulting company for small businesses and startups. Like many entrepreneurs when they first start their companies, I felt hopeful and excited. I landed multiple clients right away. Things were moving in the right direction – the direction I wanted them to go. The business's future looked promising.

Until it didn't.

About nine months in, the honeymoon period ended. Reality, fear, and uncertainty set in.

What happened next blindsided me. My stress skyrocketed. I became emotionally, mentally, and physically drained from endless problem-solving and pretending I had it handled – that I was the smart, independent woman who could juggle it all. But behind the façade, I had a client experience that nearly broke me. It left me facing clinical depression, suicidal ideation, and a Bipolar II diagnosis, all on top of my preexisting ADHD.

For the first twelve years of my career, I thrived – professionally and personally. I was in the driver's seat of my own destiny. I had a wonderful relationship with my parents, an incredible group of friends, and a career that rewarded my work ethic. I held leadership roles, served on multiple boards, and even developed and led an inaugural event for the nation's governors. At 28, I became an equity partner at a multi-million-dollar government relations firm in D.C. My proudest moment came in 2018 when, at 31, I bought my first home in Nashville entirely on my own.

Fast forward to the fall of 2021, when my mental health took a turn I never expected. The consulting firm I poured every ounce of my being into collapsed. My largest client walked away with \$30,000 worth of services. Everything my team and I had worked so hard for felt like it had vanished. I owed tens of thousands of dollars to my network partners and two employees. I didn't have the money. I didn't have a plan. And I definitely didn't have the emotional capacity to pretend I was okay. The guilt was suffocating. The shame was constant. I felt like I was failing publicly and drowning privately. What's worse is that I never recovered a single dollar.

Like many people, my identity and happiness were tied to my career. Ever since that client stiffed me, I've carried a heavy weight of loss and grief – loss of identity, purpose, and confidence. The guilt, shame, and embarrassment lingered over me every day for years (and sometimes still do). As a perfectionist, impatient, type-A control freak, any illusion of control I once thought I had evaporated.

At the same time, I was going through financial freefall. On top of the business expenses, I had personal finances piling up. I was staring at six-figure debt that nudged me closer and closer to bankruptcy. At 35, I was relying on my boyfriend (now husband – a true saint) and my parents to stay afloat.

Earlier this year, I faced another blow I never imagined: I had to sell my home – the accomplishment I was most proud of. What once symbolized my hard work, independence, and success now represented all my failures. Selling my home was a soul-crushing experience that, when compounded with the sadness, shame, and depression I'd already been carrying, drove me to once again question my self-worth and the certainty of what happens next.

Moreover, even though I was blessed with a deeply loyal and supportive circle, loneliness still crept in. I felt isolated in my mental-health struggles, alone in my work, and alone in rooms full of people who seemed to be thriving. I didn't feel like I belonged in the communities I once fit into. I no longer felt good enough or smart enough. There were many times when I avoided work events because I knew I'd have to face the inevitable, surface-level questions: "How are things going?" "How's work?" And like everyone else, I'd have to mask my emotions, force a smile, and say, "Great! Busy!" when inside, I was falling apart.

Looking back at my twenties and early thirties, especially after starting my consulting company, and even while navigating my mental-health challenges that followed, I now see how much I tried to control every outcome. I resisted anything that didn't go my way. I didn't leave room for flexibility or adjustments. Over the past few years, though, I've grown to appreciate that whether it's a business decision or a life decision, the outcome is not solely up to me. It depends on what the universe puts in front of me, how in tune I am with the signs and my intuition, and ultimately, how I choose to respond.

Speaking of responses – have you ever noticed that the more you try to control or resist, the worse everything becomes? Like a river hitting a dam, the water gets pushed back. Its progress is reversed. If it were a person, it would grow frustrated, exhausted, and burned out trying to break through. But when the river follows the signs and flows where it's being led, the journey becomes easier, even if the destination is uncertain.

When you look at it that way, I don't think uncertainty is the enemy – resisting it is. Which brings me to something most of us miss: *the good side of uncertainty*.

Once you kick the "what-ifs" off your brain's hamster wheel and stop believing the unvalidated stories you tell yourself, something powerful happens: you unlock *the gift of uncertainty*.

Uncertainty isn't just a source of fear. It can be a source of hope. It invites you to be curious, to think bigger, to take chances you never would have taken otherwise. It pushes you beyond comfort and into growth – into strength, courage, and possibility.

Recently, I've been exploring an energy-healing and wellness practice developed by Dr. Richard Schwartz called Internal Family Systems, or "Parts Work." In short, IFS teaches that we all have different "parts", or subpersonalities within us, and the goal isn't to fix or silence the parts. It's to understand, support, and help them work together so we can release what's weighing us down. At the center of this System is our core Self, made up of the 8 C's: calm, curiosity, clarity, compassion, confidence, creativity, courage, and connectedness.

Now imagine preparing for a big prospective client pitch or stepping into a trial from a mindset rooted in calm, courage, and optimism – instead of trying to control every worst-case scenario.

And just to be clear – I'm not saying you shouldn't prepare for multiple outcomes or have a backup plan. I'm saying that when you approach things from a grounded, peaceful, clear state of mind, you become more connected to both your intuition and the world around you. From that place, you develop sound strategies, make better decisions, and operate from stability and confidence rather than fear and irrational emotions.

When you let it, uncertainty can become the doorway to showing up aligned, present, and fully yourself – for your family, your friends, your team, your clients, your community – and ultimately, to becoming who you're meant to be next.

While my future still (annoyingly) feels uncertain in many ways, I try to remind myself that when I approach life with calm, curiosity, courage, and clarity, I create more opportunities for peace, joy, and self-fulfillment – and far fewer openings for pain and disappointment. I'm finally realizing that uncertainty doesn't have to control me. Instead, I get to decide what I do with it.

About Hang on Health

Drawing from her own entrepreneurial and mental-health journeys, Tina Stoyka founded Hang on Health in 2024 with the mission of empowering entrepreneurs to build the mental resilience needed to achieve peak performance, both personally and professionally.

A Nashville-based 501(c)(3), Hang on Health delivers on this mission by offering consistent, reliable, and meaningful education and community for entrepreneurs to strengthen their mental well-being and support their teams' wellness, better positioning entrepreneurs to build and scale resilient companies that achieve long-term success.

You can find more information about Hang on Health's education, resources, and events on hangonhealth.org and by following @hangonhealth on Instagram and Tina Stoyka on [LinkedIn](#). You can also reach out to Tina by emailing tina@hangonhealth.org.

About BakerWell:

BakerWell is Baker Donelson's wholistic approach to supporting the mental and physical health and well-being of every employee at Baker Donelson. The initiative, created in 2024, as part of the Firm's "Baker Vision: Strategic Plan, focuses on cultivating a work environment that recognizes that the physical, mental, and emotional wellness of all employees, helping them achieve their personal and professional successes.

BakerWell offers a range of resources and activities meant to enhance overall well-being, including coaching, training, mental health support, crisis support, physical health opportunities, stress management, and more.