



## Practice Tool

# Safe uncertainty

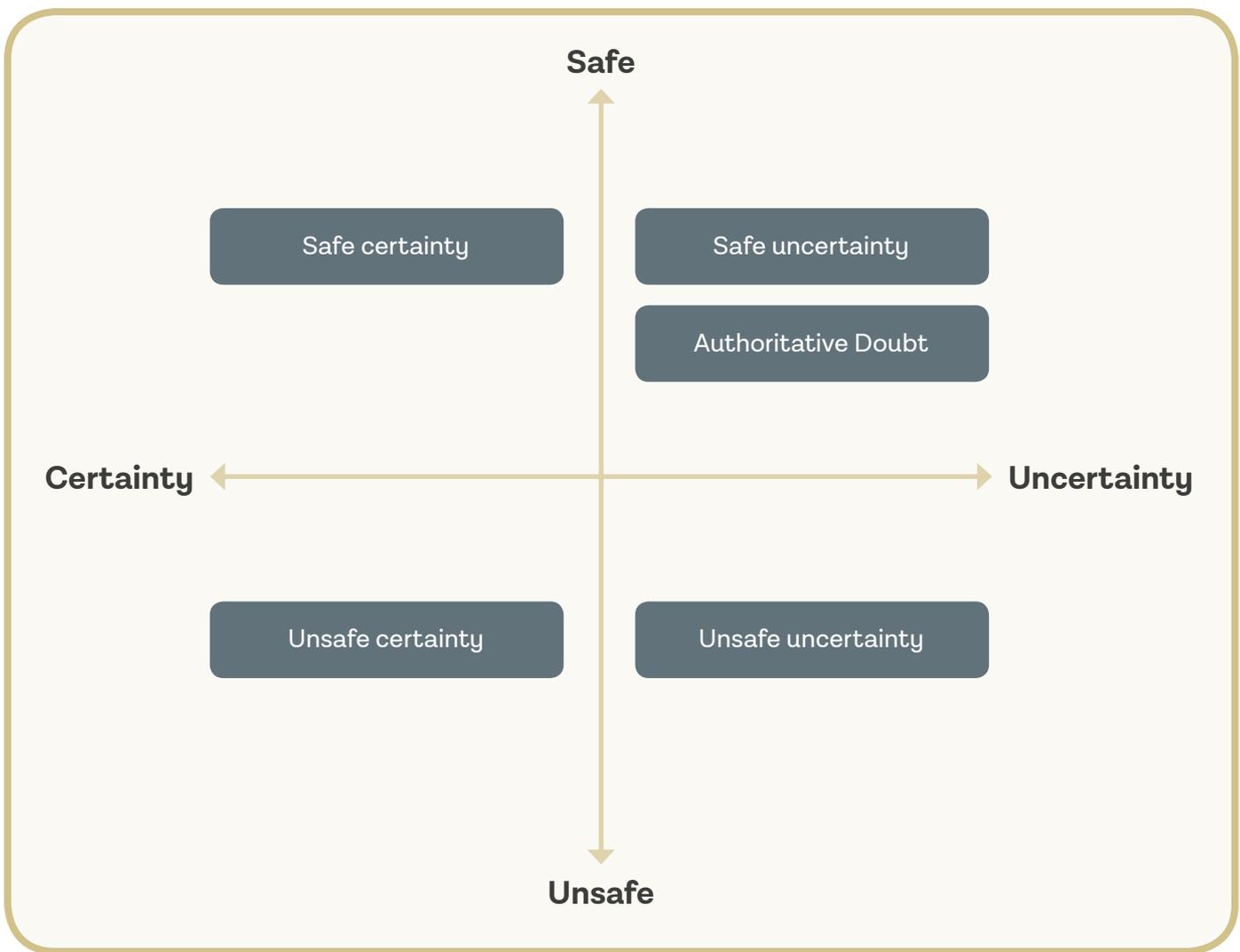
The idea of 'safe uncertainty' is widely used in systemic practice. It was first developed to help social workers think about how they can balance risk and safety in their work (Mason, 1993, 2019). This tool helps practitioners to explore how risk and safety are balanced when working with people who draw on care and support. It can be used in any practice context.

The model is called safe uncertainty because this is where practitioners are aiming to be.

You will see from the image that the model is made up of four parts:

- > **safe certainty**
- > **unsafe certainty**
- > **unsafe uncertainty**
- > **safe uncertainty.**

This can seem a little confusing at first, but it is easy to understand when it is explained.



## 1. Safe uncertainty

This is the quadrant we want to support practitioners to be in.

Being able to tolerate doubt and uncertainty and remain curious.

Using professional expertise to try and bring about change. Accepting that this may not be possible and that there will always be risk.

Practitioners who are able to work in this way are described by Mason as having 'authoritative doubt.'

## 2. Safe certainty

Feeling that the risks are too high in a situation and responding by taking action to remove the risks and promote safety. This safety is important but usually temporary.

## 3. Unsafe certainty

Jumping to conclusions too quickly about what the problem (and risks are) and how this can be solved.

## 4. Unsafe uncertainty

Being overwhelmed by the level of risk and unsure about what to do. Feeling hopeless and uncertain about how to respond.

To use this model in supervision discussions, introduce the safe uncertainty model and briefly explain each quadrant.

Then invite the practitioner to:

- > Explore how they and other professionals respond to and manage risk (and safety) in relation to a piece of work they are involved in.
- > Be curious about which quadrant they are currently in or are more drawn to.
- > Consider what needs to change to move to a position of safe uncertainty and what that might feel like.
- > Reflect on how it feels to be closer to uncertainty than certainty when managing risk.

Focusing on safe uncertainty in supervision helps practitioners to be curious and explore new ideas about practice. This opens up possibilities for different outcomes and ways of working.

It can also help support practitioners' well-being and resilience.

- > Being given a message that not everything is knowable, and not all harm can be prevented can help practitioners feel more contained and able to manage the pressures of working with risk.

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**Authors:** Guthrie (2020) and Williams (2019)