

COVID-19: Post-lockdown Anxiety

For many of us, the gradual easing of lockdown brings longed-for opportunities (even if at a social distance) – to see friends, play sports, resume contact with family in ‘real space’ or get back to work that we value.

But for many of us, even the happy, much anticipated changes can be difficult for our mental health.

And for many others the prospect of coming out of lockdown can be a real worry. This may especially apply to those more vulnerable to the virus and those with mental health concerns.

What are the mental health challenges, and what can we do?

We should be prepared for the fact that the end of lockdown might be as hard for us as the start was. Just as it took us time to find ways of coping during lockdown, we should also expect that it will take time to find our way back, and to reconnect with life.

Making the effort to find routines, stay connected, eat well, and taking regular exercise is just as important now as it was at the very start of lockdown – arguably even more so as we remain in a period of high stress but with more demands on us.

Because our situations are unique to us, it is really important to try not to judge ourselves harshly based on what other people are doing. Everybody is facing uncertainty and challenge – and we have no choice but to move through it as best we can.

Fear and anxiety

Fear and anxiety are possibly the most common emotional responses any of us will feel as we approach the release from lockdown. Finding a way to pull ourselves through lockdown took a lot of our emotional energy and we may have found a place that lets us cope, and that we don’t want to leave behind just yet.

Many of us fear becoming ill with the virus or passing infection on to loved ones, as the risk increases when people interact. This is an entirely normal response, but risk can be reduced by following the guidelines.

Every time we go back to something it is going to feel unusual or even scary. We might feel nervous or anxious. That may be because we haven’t done it in a while, and we’ve forgotten how it feels – like going to work. It might be because things have changed because of the pandemic and the routines have changed – like one-way systems and queues to enter shops.

It’s important to acknowledge that these feelings are reasonable, and to expect them. It’s only by building up tolerance gently that we can move through these fears.

We might feel angry or frustrated at other behaviours and feel the urge to rush to judgment or make comments that reflect our anxiety. It’s important to share concerns with people we trust but also to bear in mind that you can’t control others’ behaviours. If you can, express your frustration quickly and privately with someone you trust, and then let it go.

For many of us, the pandemic has increased our anxiety, or made existing mental health issues worse. It may take longer to adjust to necessary changes, take things at your own pace where possible – but try and challenge yourself to try something different each day or every couple of days. It’s very easy to allow the seclusion that was necessary in lockdown to become deliberate isolation as lockdown ends. Celebrate small wins (and big wins) and try and keep a note of what you are achieving.

Tips on coping with fear and anxiety

Control what can be controlled – there are a lot of things you can't control that cause you fear and anxiety – but there are some things you can manage or plan for. Having an action plan for managing things you might find difficult can help.

Pace yourself – recognising that you need to go at the right pace for you is important. Don't let others pressure you in to doing things you don't want to – but try not to let that be an excuse not to push yourself, especially when it comes to reconnecting with friends safely, outside your home, when rules allow and the time is also right for you. It can be hard to let others move forward without you – maybe your child wants to see friends or your partner needs to return to work, but you can't. It's important to discuss concerns with those close to you, but also to allow other people space to move at their own pace too.

Practise self-awareness and compassion - It's completely understandable to feel a mixture of emotions right now – particularly as the situation continues to change daily. On one hand, you might be craving some structure to your day, or looking forward to a socially-distanced catch up outside with a friend. But on the other hand, you might feel concerned or anxious about returning to situations you haven't been in for some time. The key is to recognise this and be kind to yourself. If you find you're being self-critical – ask yourself – how would I speak to a friend right now? You deserve to show yourself the same care and compassion that you would to someone else.

Build up tolerance – try doing something that challenges you every day, or every few days. Don't beat yourself up if it doesn't go well but keep at it. Keep a note of things you've achieved, enjoyed or surprised yourself doing.

Vary your routines – try and vary your routines so that you see different people and encounter different situations. If one supermarket makes you nervous, try another. If a walk at one time of the day is very busy, try mixing walks at busy times with walks at quieter times.

Plan ahead - Consider which situations you're feeling particularly anxious about and decide what you could do in this situation to help ease your concerns. For example, if you're anxious about taking public transport, can you find another way to travel? If not, could you travel at a quieter time of day when there may be less people around?

Speak to someone you trust - Share your fears and concerns with someone you feel comfortable talking to. The chances are they're experiencing similar feelings. Sharing how you're both feeling can help you both to feel supported and understood.

Talk to work – Many workplaces are allowing more flexible working even if people need to return. If you are finding it hard to get to work, or do particular shifts or activities because of anxiety or fear, speak to your manager or a colleague you trust if that feels right.

Arm yourself with trustworthy information - The guidance on what to do and how to stay safe during coronavirus is constantly evolving. So it's understandable if you're feeling unsure what hygiene precautions you should take, or what social distancing measures to follow. Arming yourself with the correct facts will help you feel confident that you know what to do, and can help ease your worries. But if watching or reading the news about coronavirus makes you feel anxious, limit this to once a day. It's important to make sure the information and advice you're reading comes from sources that are up-to-date, trustworthy and evidence-based. Keep up to-date with the latest guidance on coronavirus at [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk)

Look after your wellbeing - Taking care of your physical health can help you to cope with feelings of anxiety and stressful situations when they arise. Try to eat a healthy diet, limit alcohol, exercise regularly and get good-quality sleep. Remember to take some time out to look after yourself. Try a few different things until you find what works for you. You could try reading a book, practise mindfulness, get creative, bake or go outdoors for some exercise. Spending time outside in green, open spaces can have positive effects on your wellbeing.

Focus on the positives - Try to focus on the positives and take pleasure from the little things you can enjoy again. Maybe you're looking forward to getting a takeaway coffee from your favourite café again. Or it might be having a socially-distanced garden visit with a loved one you've been missing.

Seek support when you need it - If you feel you may need some support, you can contact Care first. Care first is a leading provider of confidential, professional counselling, information and advice services. All employees are eligible to use Care first, our services include; telephone counselling, information services and online support. Call Care first on the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.

Readjusting to life post-lockdown

Some of us may be worried about the return to whatever normality might look like post lockdown and are likely to already be having thoughts about whether they will be able to readjust to life post-lockdown. Just as it was ok to be worried about coping with being in lockdown, it is equally ok to worry about the next 'adjustment' phase and whatever this may bring. It's important to remember that it will take time for you to get used to the new version of life in this next phase of the pandemic and that things like being outside again and getting used to increased noise levels and everywhere being generally busier, is understandably, going to take time.

It's also important to remember that as a result of the pandemic, our former pattern of living is likely to have changed and that we might not go back to what we used to know.

As with all things it's about taking one step at a time. We may too have found a sense of safety and of comfort in staying at home; reconnecting with our families and spending 'quality time' – something that in our formerly packed lifestyles may have been a rarity for many. Equally, we might have managed to 'slow down' and really live our lives in the present and in doing so, have adopted a more mindful way of living – something which is proven to be key to maintaining wellbeing.

So, if you are one of those people that are worrying already that you're not going to be able to go back to how things were before or you are worried about the effects of things returning to how they were, then remember to be gentle and kind to yourself and to show yourself some self-compassion. Understand that it's going to take some time to readjust to life following lockdown just as it took time to adjust to lockdown and that doing this in a slow, step-by-step manner might be just what you need.

Information Sources and Useful Links –

The information for this article was originally published by the below sources. If you would like to access this and more information on 'post-lockdown anxiety' in more detail please follow the links below –

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/coming-out-of-lockdown>

<https://www.bupa.co.uk/newsroom/ourviews/manage-post-lockdown-anxiety>

<https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/blog/post-lockdown-anxiety/>

If you would like to view the Webinar on '**COVID-19: Post-lockdown Anxiety**' this is being delivered live on **Thursday 27th August at 12pm**, please use the below link to register for this session –

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/1023492902259501838>

If you are unable to join the webinar live, a recording of the session can be accessed using the same link above after the webinar has taken place.