



Mental Health Support

Starting to open up

People's lives have been turned upside down by the pandemic and the ongoing lockdown restrictions. And because of this, it's natural that we have felt stressed, angry, and varying degrees of frustration. Thankfully some glimmers of hope have been given as some of the restrictions begin to be eased and the vaccine rollout finally begins to pick up pace. And although everyone is looking forward to being able to return to a life with more variety, there can be a natural caution or even anxiety about it. All change, even change to good things, can bring some fears and 're-entry anxiety', as being noted as common - a fear or worry of returning to normal life after the relaxing of lockdown measures.



"The neurons that fire together, wire together"

This phrase was first used in 1949 by neuropsychologist Donald Hebb to describe how patterns in the brain are formed and reinforced through repetition. The more the brain does a certain task, the stronger the brain networks become, making the process more engrained each successive time. So, whatever we do repeatedly, or think repeatedly, tends to become a pattern or habit. Unfortunately, over the last year, and especially the last few months, we have been bombarded by negative messages and fear-driven guidance, which was aimed at keeping us safe. **However, all this emphasis on fear and danger can have the effect of making us cautious, future-orientated and scanning for danger. We have gotten very used to focusing on the negative, in others and in society.** The constant focus on illness can make us forget that there is a lot of healthy things around also. Therefore, despite the good elements in the news, we may find that we are not 100% sure how we feel about lockdown easing. Just as it took us time to get used to coping during lockdown, we should also expect that it will take time to get used to being back, and to reconnect with life. Things will not be the same as they were before. We will look here at a few strategies that may help us with that.



Take it slowly...

While it's important not to let anxiety and negativity spoil our enjoyment of life, it's quite normal to feel a little worried about resuming some permitted activities. Also, because the virus is still active in society it may be advisable to take small steps towards an end goal. Thus we should feel comfortable at going at our own pace, even if others move faster than us. **It is really important not to judge ourselves harshly based on what other people are doing. Remember that it is okay to say no if we don't want to attend something others are proposing.** We should start with activities that we really want to do, such as meeting a friend for a walk, rather than jumping straight into bigger plans. Start with meeting one friend for a short time, see how you feel. Then next time spend a bit longer. Meeting outdoors rather than indoors is also a good way of taking an incremental step, but in a safer way, as we know it's much less likely that the virus will be passed on outside. As we have said throughout the pandemic, continue to limit the amount of pandemic news and social media that you look at. Newspapers and news presenters, and even our health experts, get more attention by focusing on the negative and this keeps the anxiety side of the brain active, making it harder to explore in safety. After a year one thing we do not need is more Virus fodder to ruminate over.



...but make the most of life ...now.

We have had to put a lot of things on hold over the past months, and that has the effect of keeping us looking to the future. However we need to keep a balance between waiting and living fully now, even in the midst of restrictions. Sometimes when we are looking forward, we miss what this present moment has to offer. Thinking or strategizing about what we will do in the future, we miss out on opportunities that are right in front of us. In her book, "Top Five Regrets of the Dying" Bronnie Ware, an Australian palliative care nurse, documented the most common things people wished they had done differently. The main one for people when looking back was seeing how many dreams or opportunities have gone unfulfilled: **"I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me" was what they said.** The advice Ware gives is to not let what matters pass us by. Time won't wait, and we cannot keep looking to the future to think that we will finally live fully then. Let the precarious nature of this past year reveal to us the important things we want to hold on to and let go of past stuff that is holding us back. This may allow us to stop neglecting things that are important to us. Let's not wait. Seneca once wrote, "It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. When it is wasted in heedless luxury and spent on no good activity, we are forced at last by death's final constraint to realize that it has passed away before we knew it was passing. Life is long if you know how to use it."

MANAGE COVID-19 ANXIETY



STEP 1
Remember it is normal to feel concern. You are not alone in your anxiety.

STEP 2
Breathe. Deep breathing will help achieve a state of calm & reduce stress hormones. Try this: breathe in for 6 counts, hold for 4, and out for 7. Repeat as necessary.



STEP 3
Reach out. Remember STEP 1 - you are not alone. Your friends are probably anxious too. Talk to them. We are physically distanced, not socially.

STEP 4
Set limits. Some news is helpful. Too much news will only fuel your anxiety. Set an amount of time each day to absorb new information and get your news from a reliable source.



STEP 5
Keep to a daily routine. Structure is a good way to keep anxiety at bay and maintain a sense of normalcy.



The basic underlying starting place

Here is a simple first step when you notice you are a bit anxious or when the current crazy busyness gives rise to worrying thoughts: Remember we are currently bombarded with a lot of things to think about and have to juggle complexities that have not happened before. If we take a moment, we will see that our worries are most often about the future, some anticipation of something going wrong. **So the suggestion is simply to stop, take a few deeper breaths and notice 'I am healthy in this moment.'** This helps the brain come to a quiet insight - 'Not everything is great, but they're basically OK. I am still surviving.' Getting in touch with this very basic sense of OK-ness is a first step in regaining a sense of agency, or control. Let it remind you that you've been through tough times before and will get through this one, too.