Coronavirus: how to beat anxiety when going back to work

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At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, people's anxiety levels shot up. Daily reports were coming in about the number of new deaths, there was global chaos and people had to be persuaded to stay inside.

And even though this was difficult, we somehow managed to pull through. We slowly became used to our new lives in lockdown, and our anxiety began to subside.

But just as we were settling in to a new reality and routine, the UK government recently announced new measures for lifting the lockdown. Naturally, this has been causing some panic and reports are beginning to surface about how people's mental health is again being affected. Many people are worrying about whether it is safe to go back to work or send their children to school.

This anxiety is mainly related to uncertainty. We don't know what the future will hold and this can keep us up at night. It can trigger excessive and uncontrollable worrying, and it can even lead to physical symptoms, such as shortness of breath and heart palpitations.

For people with a pre-existing anxiety disorder or depression, the coronavirus pandemic is a recipe for disaster. Going back out into society might trigger or revive past conditions—such as health anxiety or obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). We're advised to wash our hands frequently and keep our distance from others at all times—but there is a point when safety behaviours begin to morph into mental disorders.

Sometimes we think that worrying serves a useful purpose, making us vigilant and prepared. We believe that it can help us arrive at a better solution by being proactive about a situation. But worrying for even a short amount of time predisposes us to even more worrying. And before we know it, we're stuck in a vicious cycle which we can't escape.

It is a myth that worrying helps us arrive at a better solution. It only makes us feel anxious and stressed—especially if the worrying becomes chronic. Just knowing this can help us take useful steps forward, because we can let go of those anxious thoughts. And most of our worries won't

come true anyway. When researchers at Penn State University asked people to track their anxieties and revisit them at a later point, they saw that 91% of the participants' worries didn't come true.

Giving up control

Sometimes, however, this is easier said than done. Sometimes it is very difficult to stop worrying. Sometimes we can't stop cleaning, and begin to perform repetitive behaviours that can turn into OCD. The way that OCD oftentimes starts is with repetitive, fixed ideas. People read news stories about coronavirus and start worrying that they might get infected if they go back out.

To alleviate this anxiety, they begin to engage in behaviours—such as repetitive, excessive hand-washing—to avert the dreaded outcome. When they do this, they are trying to take control of the situation. But the more they indulge their obsessions, the more—ironically—they begin to lose control. They become unable to rein in their thoughts and lose power over their actions. At this point, OCD has a stronghold over the person and they can't get out.

One way to prevent this from happening is to do what you can to protect yourself—wash your hands for only the recommended amount and wear a mask—and then let the chips fall where they may. And realise that no matter what you do, it is sometimes impossible to completely protect yourself. Letting go of control is, paradoxically, a way of gaining it back.

This can help us see things more clearly and with a calmer mindset. It also helps us make better decisions. And if you're worried about restrictions lifting and having to take a crowded tube again—remember, that any anxiety you will be feeling as you're on that tube will subside. It's temporary and you will bounce back from it. This is the nature of anxiety, and research has shown this time and again.

Master your life

Another good way to maintain your mental health during this time of constant change and uncertainty is to introduce a positive agenda into your daily routine. How do you do that? By scheduling positive activities into your life and monitoring them. This may include short walks in parks, trying a new recipe or anything else you might enjoy. It's also important to track yourself to make sure you're doing such activities on a consistent basis.

When we take the time to engage in pleasant activities, research shows that we not only begin to feel pleasure, but we gain "mastery". When you have mastery, you start to feel satisfied, having a sense of achievement and control. If you suffer from depression, this technique is particularly useful—it's like a crane that can help lift you out of a low state. And we know that low mood is something many people have been feeling during this pandemic.

But the road to mastery can be scary to some people. Scheduling things into your life that make you feel happy can be frightening, especially if depression has been a part of your life for a long time.

The rollercoaster of emotions we've been experiencing throughout this pandemic might also make us cautious of being too happy too quickly. You might have superstitious thoughts that, if you feel good, something bad will happen. You may worry that it won't last, or that you'll get hurt. Isn't it better to have low expectations—not get too excited and maintain a position of "defensive pessimism"?

Research tells us that the answer is no. Because when we don't hope and aim for happiness, our lives become a flat line. And isn't it better to experience a life with ups and down, like a wave with crests and troughs? Embracing life can have a significant impact on our mental

health and places us on a path to wellbeing—even during a pandemic.

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