

You and your friends are vaccinated. So why is socializing again scary?

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(HealthDay)—Heather Gould, a wedding planner in Sonoma, Calif.,

always had some social anxiety.

Before the pandemic, she'd feel queasy and think twice about going out. But Gould would power through, talking her way through industry events and client meetings without tipping off her insecurities.

But now, after more than a year of interacting only with her closest friends and family, the challenges she conquered before feel unbearable now.

"I had one of my first in-person client meetings a month ago," she said. "I was so nervous, I had to put CBD cream on because I was shaking in my boots. I literally had to have a talk with myself and say, you just have to get back in the saddle and start doing this stuff again, and you'll get better. And it's kind of been that same feeling every time I've had to go to a meeting now."

Gould isn't the only one feeling this way. A recent study by the American Psychological Association found that roughly half of Americans feel anxious about in-person interactions—a phenomenon researchers have dubbed "re-entry anxiety."

Kimberly Quinn, a [psychology professor](#) and coordinator for the Well-Being and Success Program at Champlain College in Burlington, Vt., sees a lot of this on the job.

"My students have the option daily whether they want to physically come to class—we're talking about walking maybe 200 feet," she said. "I have about 16 to 20 students in each class, and they all said they wanted to learn in person. But by the time it was the spring semester, I would have two or three come in person, the rest would be on the screen when they're living inches from the classroom."

Quinn said her students have been so conditioned by their computer screens that they're almost unable to leave their rooms, even when it's beautiful outside. It's been bad enough that the staff at Champlain has been organizing activities and giving away free video game consoles to bribe the young adults into socializing.

"At the same time, they're saying virtual learning isn't working for them," Quinn said. "So think about that. 'It's not working for me, but I'm not walking 200 feet to class.' And the anxiety and depression rates are through the ceiling."

Reintegrating into society will be difficult for some, she said, because activities like quarantining and working from home can inadvertently reinforce avoidance behavior. That leads to people becoming more sensitized by the so-called worry circuit in the brain's fight-or-flight system.

"Each time the student misses class, there's a fix of, 'Oh, dodged that bullet,'" Quinn said. "There's immediate relief, which we know gets worse. So now that behavior is strengthened to miss class, or whatever they're avoiding, is stronger next time—you know, choosing to be virtual for two days of the week, then it was three, then four."

Sanjna Selva, a senior at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., said it was hard for her to go into lockdown in 2020, but now, she enjoys her daily rhythm.

"I feel like I've settled into such a pattern of knowing what works for me and how to make this work for me," she said. "I've also grown to really enjoy my alone time. I don't enjoy the 10,000 Zoom calls a day, but I like being with a few select people, where it's not overwhelming."

In the fall, Selva plans to attend graduate school in New York City. She's

excited, but also nervous.

"I think what is most anxiety-inducing for me is the thought of going from this very insular, quiet world suddenly into everything happening at once and being surrounded by people," she said.

The [coronavirus](#) itself contributes to her worry, but Selva is mostly concerned about the energy it takes to socialize. Plus, she thinks her ability to make [small talk](#) has deteriorated over the course of the pandemic.

Even though folks might feel hesitant, Dr. Richard Catanzaro, head of psychiatry at Northern Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco, N.Y., stressed the importance of small interactions.

"A lot of holes in the social fabric have developed over the last year because all of those kinds of incidental contacts that we have with people, whether it's just going to a bar or an amusement park or sporting event, a concert—we're not having contact with people in the same way," he said. "Humans, like most mammals, need contact. So, I think that in and of itself has kind of elevated everyone's anxiety levels."

Catanzaro said it's also important for everyone to remember that they're not alone in their feelings.

"At this point, if you haven't experienced some sort of anxiety or mood disturbance over the last year, I'd be worried for you," he said. "It's been extremely stressful. So I think we have to kind of normalize that experience. You're not crazy for being anxious and a bit sad or stressed out by what's going on in the world."

If your fears get in the way of your normal functioning, however, Catanzaro said it's important to seek professional help.

Developing coping mechanisms is also crucial to staying resilient.

"Listening to music, dance, journaling, meditation—there are all sorts of ways that people can distract and self-soothe," Catanzaro said.

"Whatever works for you is good, short of doing things that are harmful. I think that one thing that we need to do as individuals is schedule time to really do some self-care. Because without that, things can get away from us."

More information: There's more about the stress Americans are feeling in and out of lockdown at the [American Psychological Association](#).

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