

What you should know if you're anxious about post-pandemic routines

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“The results from this year’s data strongly indicate that employee and organisational productivity and sustainability would greatly benefit from a focus on these four features,” Professor Bevan Catley says. Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

A little nervous about getting back into your pre-pandemic routine?

You're not alone.

A recent survey from the American Psychological Association found that 49% of adults reported feeling uncomfortable about returning to in-person interactions when the pandemic ends. And that has nothing to do with getting a COVID-19 vaccine—48% of adults who have received the vaccine reported those same uneasy feelings.

Psychology Professor Kevin Antshel, a [clinical psychologist](#) and director of the clinical psychology program in the College of Arts and Sciences, was interviewed by CNBC for a story about that survey. In this Q&A, Antshel shares why people may be feeling anxious about returning to normal activities and what they can do about it.

Q: I've spent most of the last year having very little interaction with people outside of my home. Is it normal for me to feel anxious about returning to normal day-to-day activities?

A: Absolutely. In fact, it's quite typical, and there are three reasons why people might feel this way. For some people, it's a continuing extreme fear of COVID, so there's a subset of people who are not looking forward to the return to normal because of this fear of COVID.

For other people, it's really the discomfort that comes with uncertainty. You're not sure what this process is going to look like, you're not sure what the new normal is going to look like and what we know about [anxiety](#) is, if you're trying to get anxious, start thinking about the future. The idea of an uncertain future and what this return to normal is going to look like is going to create some unease for sure.

And then there is a third subset of people that if you ask them about the

pandemic, they will definitely cite a lot of problems, but they also might cite some [positive changes](#) and they might be afraid of losing what they gained. I am a [child psychologist](#) and I work with families, and I have heard a number of families, particularly the parents, say, "we've spent more time together and have gotten closer as a family, and I'm uncomfortable that we're going to lose that."

Q: I used to do most of these activities without even thinking. What has happened to us over the last year that makes us feel more anxious?

A: After you grow accustomed to a particular lifestyle, you can perhaps lose confidence in doing the things you used to be able to do without even thinking. You start to question, you start to wonder, and the uncertainty that comes with questioning and wondering is going to make people potentially less confident about doing the things that they were able to do automatically.

For example, I'm hearing from people who used to use public transportation to get around and now they're not sure they want to use public transportation. I think that is going to create some stress, that is going to create some anxiety.

I think the important thing for people to understand is that these thoughts are normal. For people with [anxiety disorders](#), what we see is people who have these thoughts that everybody else has, but they become more distressed by them, while other people are able to say, "Well, I bet everybody is experiencing this." For anyone reading this, I would say it's important to ask, "Is this a common thought? Is this just part of the human experience? Do I think other people are thinking this?" And if the answer is yes, I'm hoping that can lead to some reassurance and validation of your experience as opposed to thinking "something is

wrong with me, so why am I having these thoughts?"

Q: What tips can you provide for those of us who are nervous about socializing with people again?

A: I'm going to rely upon our treatment for anxiety and that's exposure therapy. The more we avoid things that make us anxious, the stronger our anxiety gets. That process is called negative reinforcement; when you remove something unpleasant, it increases the probability of that behavior happening again. I have anxiety about going on public transportation, so I decide I'm not going on public transportation. Unfortunately, what happens is that avoidance of public transportation gets stronger.

I think people could consider easing in and not going full tilt. For example, I'm not going to go on public transportation every day and touch everything. Try to ease back in, and you're easing back into the things that you used to do automatically.

The anxiety is real, and it's important for everybody to have some self-compassion and think, "Is this a typical response?" Because just having anxiety about these situations isn't the problem; in fact, anxiety can be very healthy. It's when people avoid the things they're anxious about that it starts to become unhealthy. So gradually reintroducing yourself to things that you used to do before is probably the strongest recommendation.

And I want to make it clear that this isn't about not adhering to public health recommendations. You should be wearing a mask, you should be keeping your distance, but completely avoiding things and going back into the cocoon of safety is, unfortunately, going to make you more anxious.

Q: How much time will it take before it starts to feel normal again?

A: I think it depends on that person's anxiety before COVID. There were a lot of individual differences in anxiety levels before COVID, so not all of us came into COVID with the same equipment on board. The more anxious the person was before COVID, the longer the adjustment period after COVID.

People also need to be mindful of their media consumption. High levels of media consumption, particularly if it's around COVID-19, will prolong the adjustment period. I would recommend people consider having some screen-time limits, being very aware of your media consumption and your emotions after that media consumption.

Social supports are also important. I've said now for a year, I absolutely applaud the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for everything they do, they're the public health experts, but I really wish they didn't call it social distancing. I wish they would call it physical distancing because the social part is actually very helpful in helping people cope with stress. Adjusting or readjusting is continuing to recognize the protective effects of social relationships and social supports.

The last point I'd like to make is that if you're going to continue to avoid certain behaviors, that adjustment period is going to be very prolonged. If you begin a pattern of gradual re-exposure using all of the smart public health guidelines, I would envision a period of weeks until the person feels like they're back to themselves. I suspect there will be people who'll feel fine the very first day and there's also going to be people who will be very cautious and not want to re-enter so fast.

Q: It sounds strange, but does it help ease anxiety to

look on the bright side of the pandemic?

A: If you look at the research about coping with stress, positive reappraisals are important. In other words, can you look at the situation and find some positives that came out of this? I would never want to go through the past 13 months again, but at the same time, I think there are some things that I can take from this going forward that are actually going to help me to be a better person, a better father, a better husband, a better employee. It's hard sometimes, but positive reappraisal and looking at things in a more nuanced and balanced way is better than "This is terrible." The families that I work with who I think are coping the best have come to that naturally.

The most important thing to remember is that this stuff is completely normal. If you can have some self-compassion and realize it's typical, it's going to help you not to avoid those things that might make you anxious.

Provided by Syracuse University

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