

Having anxiety about returning to normal after the pandemic? Here's how to deal with it

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The COVID-19 pandemic sparked a slew of mental health issues when it started nearly a year ago, and as the virus recedes it's likely to do so

again.

Although a full return to pre-pandemic life may be months or even a year away, Dr. Tanya Middleton is already hearing from clients about the stresses and anxieties of returning to normal. Middleton, a clinical assistant professor at Ohio State University, is also a licensed counselor and runs a private practice in the Cleveland area.

"There's still that fear of: 'Are we doing this too soon?'" Middleton said of returning to normal life. "There's understandably a lot of anxiety wrapped up in that."

Any significant amount of change can lead to new stresses and anxiety, Middleton said. People should understand that it's natural to feel uneasy about a drastic life alteration, such as returning to the office after a year of working from home or dining inside a crowded restaurant after only eating outdoors for a year.

As Ohio shut down in 2020 and people were asked to stay away from friends and family, concerns over [mental health](#) became a top concern.

Lori Criss, director of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, appeared alongside Gov. Mike DeWine several times during his COVID-19 press briefings to sound the alarm.

Last April, the state established a phone line seeking to help connect trained professions to people struggling with their mental health because of the pandemic. In the first month alone, the Ohio CareLine fielded more than 1,000 calls, according to a news release.

"The pandemic has created temporary but prolonged stress, resulting in increased anxiety, sadness, and loss for so many," Criss said. "Even with the end in sight, like all-[natural disasters](#) the effects of the pandemic on

mental health could persist for years."

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. Even 48% of who have received the COVID-19 vaccine report feeling the same way.

It will take time for anxiety, stress and depression induced by the virus to fully subside. But, Middleton said, there are ways to overcome them.

One method to dealing with post-pandemic anxiety is meditation. Meditation is the process of training one's attention on something, whether that be breathing, an object or something else, said Lama Kathy Wesley, who teaches meditation for Columbus Karma Thegsum Chöling Buddhist Center.

Meditation allows people to let go of some of their thoughts and concerns, Wesley said. That, she said, can be a powerful thing when there's so many things happening at once like there has been with the pandemic.

"Once you learn how to drop something, that's actually a really empowering feeling," Wesley said. "You are in charge with what you're going to do with your attention."

Since the virus first hit Ohio in March 2020, Wesley has been teaching meditation virtually using video conferencing software. Although she's looking forward to the day when she and her students can gather again, Wesley is glad she's been able to help them meditate in trying times.

Although it's hard to know for sure, Wesley said her classes have increased in size recently which could be the result of the waning pandemic.

Meditation may not be for everyone though. In that case, Middleton suggested people try getting up and moving, whether that be by exercising, trying something like yoga or simply going for a walk.

If all else fails, Middleton suggested people just try to slowly ease back into their pre-pandemic lives. There's no need to rush, she said.

"It's kind of like swimming," Middleton said. "If you're worried, I wouldn't suggest getting on a plane. ... If you were getting groceries delivered, go to the grocery store but maybe go during less busy hours. It's OK to take small baby steps toward normal."

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