

Why you may be feeling anxious exiting lockdown

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It's very normal to feel anxious about socialising after being in lockdown for so many months," said Dr Suraj Samtani. Credit: Emi Berry

As we begin to gradually reopen in New South Wales after more than 100 days in lockdown, friends and family joke about bringing notes with talking points when reconnecting—as we're all potentially feeling a little

rusty in the socializing department. But jokes aside, there are also those who have expressed feelings of anxiety and mixed emotions as we start to return to some form of normality.

Is it normal to feel this way? And how can we best manage our feelings of anxiety?

"It's very normal to feel anxious about socializing after being in lockdown for so many months," said Dr. Suraj Samtani, clinical psychologist at UNSW Medicine & Health and Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Healthy Brain Ageing (CHeBA). "Studies from other countries have found that a lot of people felt this way during the first few months of reopening after lockdown. Remember that you are not alone in feeling this way."

Dr. Samtani said there are a number of factors that may cause individuals to feel anxious as they re-enter society. "First, it's important to remember that COVID infections are a health condition, so it's human to feel anxious about getting sick. It may be that friends or family have had COVID and we saw what it did to them.

"It may be that we're worried about our loved ones getting COVID if we start to socialize again. We may also feel this way because we have not been socializing for a long time so it's easy to lose confidence."

Allow yourself time to readjust

If you are feeling anxious, Dr. Samtani said it's important to go at your own pace and allow yourself time to readjust.

"We know from other countries that people felt anxious about reopening for a few months and then their anxiety decreased naturally over time. If you are feeling anxious, start with small steps—like meeting one or two

people outdoors—and repeat the steps until you feel more confident before moving on to medium steps."

Simply strategies such as setting time boundaries may also help you get back into the social groove. Rather than accepting open-ended social interactions, you may feel more comfortable meeting up over a coffee for an hour or so. It's important to articulate what you're comfortable and not comfortable doing when it comes to socializing.

Dr. Samtani also suggests trusting and following the government's health advice instead of looking at other unofficial sources of information. "Don't binge watch COVID news and don't avoid situations if you know they are safe, but take things step by step.

"Avoidance leads to anxiety, but experience leads to confidence."

Those who are most likely to feel anxious

Individuals in particular pockets of society are more likely to feel anxious about reopening, such as those suffering from financial stress. Dr. Samtani said [research](#) showed people living alone, who lost income or had economic worries felt more anxious during lockdown.

"Often these are [young adults](#) working in gig economies who don't have savings, migrants or people living with health conditions. People with pre-existing mental [health conditions](#) are more at risk of feeling anxious due to changes in restrictions. As children go back to school, parents and teachers may also feel anxious about re-opening."

The effects of reduced social connection on individuals as a result of the pandemic may depend on an individual's personality. Interestingly, research from Kingston University in the UK revealed extroverts experienced less anxiety during lockdown.

However, despite individual characteristics, socializing is potentially going to feel more exhausting for some of us compared to pre-pandemic times as more thought needs to go into socializing safely. As we navigate public health orders that are constantly being updated, as well as ongoing public health measures such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and entry into venues based on vaccination status, there are additional factors we now need to consider before stepping out the door. And that's okay. Just remember, it's perfectly normal to feel stressed as we begin to reconnect with society. Sharing your feelings with a close friend or relative will help overcome these feelings.

"It's important to have someone—like a friend, family member or [health](#) professional—you can confide in about your feelings and the changes that are happening. Set up a routine with getting outdoors, exercising and doing activities you enjoy. Helping others can also help us to reduce our anxiety. Reach out to a friend or family member who has been isolated," said Dr. Samtani.

While there may be ongoing anxiety-related conditions as we gradually reopen, the good news is a [study](#) on resilience suggested that we can build resilience during the pandemic by actively seeking social support, finding meaning in our experiences, and helping others.

Provided by University of New South Wales

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