

Psychologist on 'the great snapback' and tips for post-lockdown living

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As pandemic restrictions are lifted, Steve Joordens, a professor of psychology at U of T Scarborough, says most Canadians will likely have little difficulty adjusting to more in-person interactions. Credit: Steve Joordens

After nearly two years of coping with COVID-19 lockdowns and

restrictions, there's a host of new things to consider as pandemic measures begin to ease.

That includes navigating a return to life with far more in-person interactions.

"For the vast majority of us, there will be what I call the great snapback," says Steve Joordens, a professor in the department of psychology at the University of Toronto Scarborough.

"People are going to worry beforehand, but once they're in that environment for let's say a day or two, I predict they'll be behaving largely like they did pre-pandemic."

To learn more, U of T News writer Mariam Matti recently spoke with Joordens about life after the lockdowns.

Reflecting on the last two years, what kind of toll have lockdowns and other restrictions had on people?

It's really reduced our feeling of empowerment. One of the psychological concepts we talk about is something called locus of control. We talk about it being internal or external. Someone with an internal locus of control feels like they have the power to shape their future. Someone with an external locus of control feels like things happen to them. I think we've all shifted a little external over these times.

We've also run into something that some psychologists call learned helplessness, where we keep feeling like we're going to get out of this and then we get thrown right back in. That makes us start to feel like, "Wow, there's nothing we can do to put an end to this."

We've also learned the importance of our social connections and those random conversations. We don't really know why, but we all feel like something is missing. That's probably what's missing—that social connection that we're used to feeling.

What else have people been feeling?

So many things. The pandemic has been a real challenge to our mental health. At the beginning, the dominant feeling was anxiety. It wasn't clear what we should do, and our systems have a special mode when we are anxious, which didn't fit the pandemic very well. The special mode, which we call the [sympathetic nervous system](#) or the "fight or flight" reflex, usually kicks in when something threatens us. But those things that threaten us used to always be what we call acute threats. If a bear popped out of the woods, you'd fight or flee. Either way an hour from now, the situation would be over.

That system gets us up and ready for a challenge. But then it's supposed to be able to go back to a rest state afterwards. We've been fighting a bear for two years now. The bear just isn't leaving. Every morning, we would wake up and it's there. When the fight or flight feeling is there for too long, it's exhausting. We have hit the exhaustion stage.

It's hard to escape the anxiety of it when it's always on the news, and it's always changing. I think we all just want our old lives back, in a very desperate way. I think that's where we kind of are in our minds now.

What tips do you have to manage these feelings?

Guided audio relaxations are great. If you can get to know relaxation and get comfortable with knowing how it feels, you can eventually start to command that feeling. So, when you're feeling anxious, you cannot feel

both anxious and relaxed. Rather than focusing on the anxiety, focus on the relaxation feeling. We all know this intuitively when we say things like, "Take deep breaths"—that's the relaxation way of breathing. When you're taking those deep breaths, you're pushing your body into more of a relaxation state. You have to learn that skill.

Anxiety is produced by what we're thinking about in our head. If you watch the news, you're loading your head up full of scary stuff, and you're going to walk away feeling anxious. You can just as easily use your environment to produce better things up here. Part of it is attending to what does that naturally. We know things like singing, dancing, laughing and social connection are big ones.

I suggest to people to learn what makes them feel good, and then use that as medicine. When our system is going nuts, we're getting cortisol and adrenaline flushed into our body, and that's what's causing damage when it keeps being flushed in. When you sing or dance or have a [social connection](#), you have lots of positive hormones start to enter.

You'll never escape it completely, but you need vacations.

A lot of people have been very isolated or housebound for a long time. How do we go back to being social?

Once we get back into familiar situations, we all have habits about how things work in that context. I sometimes describe it as a warm blanket of familiarity—we're going to feel OK and comfortable. The brain understands a familiar environment and how things work.

People are going to worry beforehand, but once most people are in that environment for let's say a day or two, I predict they'll be behaving largely like they did pre-pandemic. These social connections are critical

and once we get back into those situations where we can interact with other people, I believe that's going to feel natural to us. For the vast majority of us, there will be what I call "the great snapback." They'll be doing what they always used to do.

What can somebody do to feel more empowered?

First, I'll recommend a hundred-year-old book, which is still relevant. It's called *How To Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie. It was published in 1936, but it's written very well. It's the author talking to salespeople who were going door-to-door during that time. They'd go and knock on a door, and they would hope they could have some positive interaction with a stranger they just met. Carnegie provides tips and strategies about how to succeed in those situations. To get that empowerment, you need to feel some sense of competence. So, you need to feel like, "OK, I know how to do this."

There is a science to meeting another person and striking up a conversation and it boils down to simple things. One of those things is called active listening. The idea is you're talking to that person to better understand them and their perspective.

I try to tell students to have a few simple strategies. One of them is preparing six questions before a networking event so they're ready to strike up a conversation with a stranger. As they talk, you will get what I call connection points. With those connection points, you can turn the listening into more of a conversation.

Where you will really get the empowerment is when people do this a few times and it goes well, and they walk away from that going, "You know, I was anxious going into that, but it went well and I think I made a new friend there."

Once you have success doing that then it can almost start to feel addictive. You will feel like you have the tools to do this well, but it's a process. Start with the knowledge, what are some tips, strategies, techniques and then add in the practice. It will start to feel less daunting.

Provided by University of Toronto

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