Re-entry Anxiety

Tips for Individuals Returning to Work & Social Life

A Sense of Positive Emotion & Energy

The level of uncertainty inherent in the COVID-19 pandemic has been anxiety-provoking for most people. Many people had started to become habituated to a new way of life, one that was primarily spent indoors, that started to feel safe or even comforting. Now, attempting to resume required activities, while the pandemic is still ongoing, is another transition that the brain needs to adapt to, in a short span of time.

So, it's not surprising that this new transition would be anxiety-provoking. The pandemic continues to trigger uncertainty, which may involve worries about who might be infected, whether one will get infected/ill, worries about health of family members, job worries, financial worries, parenting worries, and/or other worries.

What Is Re-entry Anxiety?

Re-entry anxiety is an overall uneasiness or uncertainty about returning to the way things were before the COVID-19 groups, social life, attending large events and visiting places outside of home in general. It's an adjustment reaction to a challenging situation.

Why Is It Happening?

Re-entry anxiety can come in many different forms. Mental health experts report there are generally two groups of people who experience re-entry anxiety:
1. Those who worry they will catch or spread COVID-19
2. Those who find it challenging to reengage in social interactions

Remember that feelings about returning vary. Many aspects of re-entry will be perceived differently from person to person. While some will draw comfort from the increased social contact, others may experience heightened anxiety or dread when returning to social situations. As more workplaces welcome employees back, some will feel relieved to regain a dedicated workspace, while others may have difficulty leaving their remote-work lifestyle behind. Be

mindful that what feels to you like an encouraging step forward might have the opposite effect on someone else. Re-entry also requires us to break some preferred new routines that involved less commuting, spending more time with family, the convenience of being able to prepare food at home and other flexibilities.

Coping With Re-entry Anxiety

Different people have different coping strategies, but there are some common ways everyone can cope with re-entry anxiety. If you're feeling anxious as you transition back to your pre-COVID-19 life, consider the following coping tips:

1. *Prepare yourself for re-entry:* Be patient and remember to give yourself permission to feel anxiety, as it's often a normal response to something challenging. Talk with your workplace and friends about your situation and what you might need to help you gain confidence and gradually return to a new and balanced routine for work and life. Continue to communicate your needs, clarify expectations with others and ask for help when needed.

2. *A Gradual Return*: Start small and gradually build up your exposure to larger social interactions. Exposure is considered the best evidence-based treatment for anxiety. Within public health guidelines, try slowly re-introducing yourself to situations that typically induce some anxiety, rather than confronting them all at once. For example, if you feel anxious about returning to the social atmosphere of your workplace, start by scheduling a friendly catch-up call with one or two co-workers. Exposure allows you to readjust your assessment of the risk associated with the fear, reducing the anxiety it causes over time. Establishing (new) routines and rituals can be protective at times of transition, as it helps to create a sense of security, stability and control in times of change.

3. *Self-care*: Take care of yourself and set aside time every day to relax and reset your mind. Some accessible and helpful anxiety management techniques include deep breathing, mindfulness meditation, exercise, journaling, using helpful self-talk and talking with someone you trust.

4. *Focus on what you're excited to do again*: Getting back to normal isn't going to happen overnight but having a plan of action can help you feel in control, shift your thinking from anxious to positive and minimise feelings of hopelessness. Consider making a post-pandemic bucket list to focus on the new possibilities. Do what makes you happy, even if only for a few minutes each day. It's important to regularly engage in something fulfilling for yourself.

5. *Recognise What You Can Control*: Many people are experiencing a sense of lack of control during this pandemic. Doing simple, yet important things such as following COVID-19 guidelines (from authentic sources, Health Dept) can help you regain some sense of control in otherwise uncertain times. Recognising and working on what you can control, can be a valuable step in overcoming anxiety.

6. *Pay Attention to Your Unique Situation and Boundaries*: Your re-entry anxiety may have additional, valid reasons- for instance, if you are 60 years of age or above, or suffering from underlying health conditions(s). Gain advice, where needed, from your doctor. Set boundaries by letting other people know what you're comfortable with. There's no need to apologise for not wanting to do something, so clearly explain how you feel and be respectful of others.

7. *Stay Connected*: The pandemic has caused many to feel isolated. We know that social connectedness is a positive, protective factor for mental health. The good news is that technology makes it possible to stay connected with friends and family members, while exercising physical distancing, so, stay connected.

When is Re-Entry Anxiety a Problem?

When re-entry anxiety becomes excessive or starts interfering significantly with your functioning in one or more areas of life, it's time to seek professional help. The good news is that there are effective, evidence-based treatments for anxiety. MORE tips for coping, resilience and positive energy on our resources page.

Collated from Sources: Australian Psychological Society; American Psychological Association; Anxiety & Depression Association of America; Mental Health Commission of Canada.