

Looking after your mental health as we come out of lockdown – advice from the Mental Health Foundation

For many of us, the gradual easing of lockdown brings longed-for opportunities (even if at a social distance) – to see friends, play sports, resume contact with family in ‘real space’ or get back to work that we value.

But for many of us, even the happy, much anticipated changes can be difficult for our mental health. And for many others the prospect of coming out of lockdown when debate is still live about the science supporting it can be a real worry. This may especially apply to those more vulnerable to the virus and those of us with mental health concerns.

People shielding or more at risk

For those who are shielding, the easing of lockdown measures has been minimal, although the government will be reviewing the guidelines for people who are shielding.

People aged over 70, pregnant women and people with a long-term health condition are groups identified as being at greater risk from coronavirus, although only some will have been asked to shield.

However, they have been advised to take extra care of themselves to minimise their risk of contracting the virus. For these groups in particular it might be difficult to see their lives returning to anything like ‘normal’ for a much longer time.

So where are the challenges to our mental health coming out of lockdown, and what can we do about them?

What are the mental health challenges, and what can we do?

We should be prepared for the fact that the end of lockdown might be as hard for us as the start was.

Just as it took us time to find ways of coping during lockdown, we should also expect that it will take time to find our way back, and to reconnect with life.

Our mental health tips: about finding routines, staying connected, eating well, and taking exercise apply just as much now as they did at the start of lockdown – arguably even more so as we remain in a period of high stress but with more demands on us.

Because our situations are unique to us, it is really important to try not to judge ourselves harshly based on what other people are doing. Everybody

is facing uncertainty and challenge – and we have no choice but to move through it as best we can.

Fear and anxiety

Fear and anxiety are possibly the most common emotional responses any of us will feel as we approach the release from lockdown. Finding a way to pull ourselves through lockdown took a lot of our emotional energy and we may have found a place that lets us cope, and that we don't want to leave behind just yet.

Many of us fear becoming ill with the virus or passing infection on to loved ones, as the risk increases when people interact. This is an entirely normal response, but following the guidelines can reduce risk.

Every time we go back to something it is going to feel unusual or even scary. We might feel nervous or anxious.

That may be because we haven't done it in a while, and we've forgotten how it feels – like going to work. It might be because things have changed because of the pandemic and the routines have changed – like one-way systems and queues to enter shops.

It's important to acknowledge that these feelings are reasonable, and to expect them. It's only by building up tolerance gently that we can move through these fears.

We might feel angry or frustrated at other behaviours and feel the urge to rush to judgment or make comments on social media that reflect our anxiety. It's important to share concerns with people we trust but also to bear in mind that you can't control others' behaviours, and that commenting online can lead quite quickly to unpleasantness.

If you can, express your frustration quickly and privately with someone you trust, and then let it go. If we hold on to things we can get pulled into rumination – where we chew over things in our heads.

For many of us, the pandemic has increased our anxiety, or made existing mental health issues worse. It may take longer to adjust to necessary changes – for example one-way systems in shops blocking off safe exit routes or wearing facemasks triggering trauma flashbacks, or panic attacks because of the sensation of not being able to breathe.

If possible, take things at your own pace – but try and challenge yourself to try something different each day or every couple of days. It's very easy to allow the seclusion that was necessary in lockdown to become deliberate isolation as lockdown ends. Celebrate small wins (and big wins) and try and keep a note of what you are achieving.

For many people lockdown has been relatively quiet and isolated. Coming back into shops, traffic, transport, and work might lead to sensory overload

– feeling overwhelmed by sights, sounds or smells. Headphones may be a good way to reduce some of this by helping you to focus and creating a distraction with calls, music, podcasts or audio books.

Tips on coping with fear and anxiety

Control what can be controlled – there are a lot of things you can't control that cause you fear and anxiety – but there are some things you can manage or plan for. Having an action plan for managing things you might find difficult can help.

Pace yourself – recognising that you need to go at the right pace for you is important. Don't let others bully or pressure you into doing things you don't want to – but try not to let that be an excuse not to push yourself, especially when it comes to reconnecting with friends safely, outside your home, when rules allow and the time is also right for you. It can be hard to let others move forward without you – maybe your child wants to see friends or needs to return to work, but you can't. It's important to discuss concerns with those close to you, but also to allow other people space to move at their own pace.

Build up tolerance – try doing something that challenges you every day, or every few days. Don't beat yourself up if it doesn't go well but keep at it. Keep a note of things you've achieved, enjoyed or surprised yourself doing.

Vary your routines – try and vary your routines so that you see different people and encounter different situations. If one supermarket makes you nervous, try another. If a walk at one time of the day is very busy, try mixing walks at busy times with walks at quieter times.

Talk to work – Many workplaces are allowing more flexible working even if people need to return. If you are finding it hard to get to work, or do particular shifts or activities because of anxiety or fear, speak to your manager or a colleague you trust if that feels right. If you have or have had longer term mental health problems, you may be entitled to reasonable adjustments as a disabled person under the Equality Act. Even if you haven't disclosed before, if it feels safe to do so now you might be able to benefit from doing so.

Coping with uncertainty

There has been a lot of talk of a 'new normal' – but normal is changing and uncertainty, and managing risk, is going to be the reality for the foreseeable

future. This is not something that's comfortable for many of us, particularly when we're only just about coping with our mental health.

'New normal' for most of us will mean 'what we need to get through today, or this week' – it's going to be very difficult to predict what the course of the rest of the year will look like, and with so much of the media talking about possibilities and stages without certainty, it's easy to get caught up in 'what-ifs'.

It can help to focus on the things we have learned and achieved in the last few months.

Most of us have been tested in ways we never imagined, have passed those tests and found new ways to manage – or even flourish. For many of us lockdown has challenged our values and what is important to us. The life, values, and attitudes we had in early March might not be the ones we want to return to in July, and there may be opportunities for us to make positive changes in our lives as well.

Focus on the present – you can only do your best with what you have today. With regulations changing frequently, and lots of conflicting media discussions, try and keep a focus on the moment. Mindfulness meditation is one way of bringing your mind back to the present moment.

Bring things that are certain back into focus – whilst a lot of things are uncertain at the moment, there are also things to be hopeful about. Try to record and appreciate good things as they happen. Try and take opportunities to reset and relax.

Talk to people you trust – it's important to talk about how you feel. Don't dismiss your concerns or judge yourself too harshly. You may also be able to find your tribe online, but try and get outside perspectives too.

Picking up social lives

As we move out of lockdown it's going to be possible to start picking up our social lives again – albeit with changes for the foreseeable future. Some of us are desperate to do so – but others will be nervous about doing so – or unable to do so because of their situations.

If you are part of a social group doing an activity together, try and plan ways for people who aren't ready for face to face meetings to still take part.

We may have become comfortable in our own space and with our own company in lockdown – it's been intense in all sorts of ways and we might really have to push ourselves to reconnect with people and overcome initial awkwardness. Whether it's knowing how to insist on social distancing with friends or relatives, knowing where you have to wear a mask, or feeling odd not stopping to chat in the street many of us are keen to get it right, and worried about slipping up. It's all new – and doing your best to follow the rules is good enough for most situations.

That also goes for our children's friendships – many children have been desperate to see friends, but all families are making sense of the changes as they come and it's important to make an extra effort to pick up friendships especially if schools aren't back.

If we are shielding or in a vulnerable group, it's likely that as others around us start to emerge from lockdown and start to do things that we miss, we may feel more isolated and less able to resist pressure to reduce lockdown measures. There's a real risk that employers, schools businesses and friends and family will be less able to relate and support as the lockdown releases for others. It takes considerable emotional labour to keep reminding people why you can't participate or follow the same rules as a shielded person – and there is a penalty in terms of guilt to be paid for many.

Remember that rules and guidelines vary depending on who you are and where you live.

Our working lives were changed enormously when lockdown started – whether we stayed working as a key worker, worked from home, were placed on furlough or lost our jobs. As lockdown eases, our working lives will change again, and some people will be looking for new work.

For many of us, coming out of lockdown is not a choice. Across the country people are being called to return to work, even when the official advice is to work from home wherever possible. For many of us this isn't possible and the prospect of return carries with it a need to weigh up the potential safety risks to family, with the need to earn money, restart the economy and/or provide service to others and ourselves.

Looking after children and family

During lockdown, those of us with caring responsibilities have supported our families. For parents and carers, returning to work is likely to provide a distance that might be much welcomed and needed – but also prove challenging emotionally when family closeness has been such a support to so many during lockdown.

With schools either closed, or only open part time for some pupils up until the summer break at least, parents face a longer term need to cover childcare, assist with school work and make decisions about whether and when to send children back. Parents want to do their best by their children – but many are now under pressure from work to either return to the office, or to resume a level of productivity and engagement that doesn't fit with their childcare responsibilities across the working week. A similar situation arises for unpaid carers: perhaps the physical or mental health of the person they care for has deteriorated during lockdown and

their own needs have changed. This will mean new assessments and changes in service provision.

Grief

Grief is something many of us will have experienced during the lockdown. Many people will have faced the loss of someone close during these past months, and with attendance at funerals restricted, and non-socially distanced company only very recently available to very specific groups, this has been doubly hard.

As we start to move out of lockdown it will be possible to see people again, and to provide support to those close to us who have been bereaved, although at the moment this must be socially distanced and cannot involve a hug – unless you are a single parent with children aged under 18, or a person living alone, who has formed a 'bubble' with one other household.