

MENTAL HEALTH

July 2, 2021

Your Post-Pandemic Anxiety Is 100% Normal — But How Should You Deal With It?

By **Ryan Buxton**

Psychologists share their coping strategies for your complicated feelings about the world re-opening.



Share   

After more than a year of isolation, it feels like a switch has flipped. Suddenly offices are reopening, friends are throwing parties, and favorite restaurants are welcoming indoor

Anxiety is on the rise as Americans plunge back into the crowded spaces we inhabited before Covid-19 — and sort through questions about what the spread of the Delta variant means for our cultural rebound. At psychologist Kevin Chapman’s anxiety center in Louisville, Ky., the phone “has literally rung off the hook,” he said. Whether it’s old clients feeling their anxiety more acutely or new clients for whom the pandemic was a tipping point into seeking help, Chapman is facing nonstop questions about how to navigate this complicated moment.

But there’s good news: Feeling anxious right now is 100% normal. Even better news? This anxiety can be your mind’s way of readying you for a changing way of life. “Part of it is that we *should* be anxious because the whole purpose of anxiety, the function of it, is to help us prepare for future threats,” Chapman said. “Anxiety is actually a good emotional experience. It’s only a problem when it’s chronic. Normalize the anxiety — that’s the resounding theme.”

What are we afraid of?

Spending more than a year in fear of an infectious virus — and responding by sheltering ourselves in our own private spaces — has changed the way we mentally engage with public areas that once felt safe.

“What happens is that the brain has learned a threatening association now. The pandemic has really kind of tipped all of us to think about certain situations [differently], meaning our limbic system in our brain tells us that it’s dangerous to be in this setting,” Chapman said.

that previously seemed unremarkable into stressful undertakings. As happy as some of us may be to ditch our face masks — and the troublesome acne that comes with them — going maskless can also affect interpersonal dynamics.

“In many ways, masks have buffered someone’s social anxiety because you can’t see all of their emotional experience and expressions. So now that you’re removing that quote-unquote ‘safety signal’... people are increasingly anxious,” Chapman said. “It’s like, ‘Now that I don’t have to wear a mask in some places, it’s kind of odd for me — and awkward, because now people can pay attention to my nonverbal facial expressions.’”

Even people who do feel comfortable returning to a busy social calendar are struggling with maneuvering the tricky conversations about where others stand. Psychologist Jennifer Lewis says that for many of the young people who visit her practice, the dance of the dating game has become inherently more complicated.

“Some people feel they have to ask potential partners, ‘Are you vaccinated? How would you feel if a person is unvaccinated?’” Lewis said. “So I’m having a lot of my clients who are single struggle with it. It’s added an extra layer to dating and the different questions you would typically ask.”

It all boils down to feelings of uncertainty about what the world will be like as we return to it after months and months of having near-total control of our personal quarantine environments.

How do we cope with it?

Lewis’s approach to post-pandemic anxiety is instructing clients to arm themselves with information. For workers headed back into an office, for example, she advises reaching out to employers for concrete details about what they’re walking into. What is the building’s

The next step is to dip a toe into the environments you'll be reintroducing yourself to as you get back to a routine. Lewis is based in New York City, so for most of her clients, returning to work means taking a busy bus or train — exactly the kind of spaces that became threatening during the pandemic.

“I would use a systematic desensitization approach, like exposure therapy. I invite them to do a low-risk activity where they would maybe go on the subway for one stop before they actually have to go back to work,” Lewis said. “Just go in for an appointment, or to meet a friend, that sort of thing, before you actually do something that you're *required* to do.”

Once you're back at the office, partitioning your time is another helpful strategy. Building in breaks for lunch or a quick walk makes days more manageable — and so does reminding yourself that uncomfortable activities are hardest at the beginning.

“Day one and day two are going to be the most challenging,” Lewis said. “It's managing those two days, and then you get to day three and you realize you're halfway through the week. Then it's Friday and you might say, ‘My goodness, I made it!’ Once you've gotten that first week under your belt, you think, ‘This is great, I think I'm back.’”

Much of our anxiety about events comes from a tendency to latch onto the worst-case scenario. If you tell yourself something will be terrible, “that thought sounds like a fact, and therefore the only emotion I can experience is anxiety,” Chapman said.

But what if you thought differently? Luckily, you don't need to force positive thinking — “flexible thoughts” are just as effective, Chapman explained: “What's another interpretation? Could it be that the grocery store is not that bad? Could it be that I'll be anxious, but tolerate it? Could it be that the line will be shorter than I expected?”

Chapman’s most fundamental advice is to “ride the wave” of your anxiety. As you enter spaces that make you nervous, take notice of that discomfort and allow your brain to process it. With repetition, you’ll recalibrate and allow yourself to relax.

“In other words, if I stay in the pocket — to use a football term — it might be uncomfortable, but I just scored a touchdown,” he said. “The more I put myself in these situations that are uncomfortable, the more my brain learns that it’s non-threatening.”

More About

MENTAL HEALTH

June 17, 2021

7 Tips for Helping Children Coping With Grief This Father’s Day

May 11, 2021

Ex-Buzzfeed Star Kelsey Darragh Shares the Best Piece of Mental Health Advice She’s Ever Received