

# Are You Anxious About Getting Back to Normal?

Thousands of Americans are getting vaccinated for COVID-19 each day. After more than a year of social distancing, most of us are looking forward to going out and socializing. But this "return to normal" can also trigger post-pandemic anxiety.

For some, it's the fear of being in a crowd or near others without a mask. You may be nervous about returning to rush-hour commutes to a fast-paced workplace, traveling on a plane, dating again, or having close contact with unvaccinated people. For those managing obsessive/compulsive disorders, addictions, or social anxiety, the approaching resurgence of activity outside the home may signal a loss of sense of control.

## Are you ready to return to normal?

Even though you have dearly missed visiting with friends and family for the past year, the idea of hugging them or sharing a pizza might still feel unsafe and risky.

All of these concerns and feelings are common and justified. But that doesn't mean you need to continue self-isolating in fear while the world moves on. And you shouldn't feel pressured to jump back into pre-pandemic behaviors and habits the moment you are fully vaccinated.

"You have to figure out what's right for you," says Felicia Gould, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist with the University of Miami Health System. "Reassure your family and friends that you want to see them. But, it's okay to establish some ground rules before you spend time together."

Having these conversations can be difficult. Dr. Gould recommends starting on the right foot with a positive, genuine sentiment like, ‘I’m excited to see you after all this time apart.’ Then clearly express what you’re concerned about and what kind of socializing you’re comfortable with at this time. Offer alternative activities and environments that don’t involve crowds or being indoors.

“If you’re apprehensive, try meeting up with one person at a time,” she says. “Invite a friend or family member to your backyard for a picnic instead of going to a popular indoor restaurant. If your loved ones live far away, propose a future date to visit when you may feel up to traveling on a plane.” Close the conversation on another positive note, such as, ‘I appreciate your patience and understanding. I’ve loved seeing you on Zoom during this tough year.’

“Stick to your guns, and don’t go out of your comfort zone too quickly,” Dr. Gould says. “When you and your loved ones finally reconnect in person, you want it to be a positive, comforting experience. So, set your limits, express them thoughtfully, and propose alternative social activities and environments that will allow you to spend time together but also make you feel comfortable.”

## **When is it safe to get back out there?**

“If you are fully vaccinated or not, get educated about your risk for COVID-19,” Dr. Gould says. “The number one way to deal with fear and anxiety is to replace it with knowledge and an educated plan of action.”

Learn about the proven efficacy and safety of the COVID-19 vaccines. Speak with your doctor about your risk factors for severe infection, such as your age, underlying health conditions, immune function, and the virus infection rate where you live. “Based on this understanding, you can make an informed decision on which calculated risks make the most sense and will be most beneficial, and make gradual

changes to your behavior,” Dr. Gould says.

It’s normal to experience some concern and even fear about this change that affects many aspects of daily life. If you can effectively manage and lower your stress level as you transition back to normalcy, socializing face to face with people you trust can be a rewarding and uplifting experience.

## **How to manage post-pandemic anxiety**

To keep your anxiety in check, give yourself time to adjust to the new normal. “Acknowledge and honor your changing physical and mental energy levels,” Dr. Gould says. “Self-care isn’t just a trendy term. It’s an essential practice during challenging times like these. Ensure that you get enough sleep, exercise, and healthy foods. Socializing is also part of self-care. But don’t sacrifice taking care of yourself in favor of going to a bar with friends at every opportunity. Carve out an appropriate amount of time to socialize safely in a way that’s in line with your risk level.”

Don’t feel guilty for turning down social invitations. Even though you’ve been yearning to get back out there, you still need alone time. Some of us crave more solo time than others, and the end of the pandemic won’t change that.

“This past year, we’ve been flooded with demand for mental healthcare,” Dr. Gould says. “Many adults who typically cope with stress and normal levels of anxiety or depression by sweating it out at the gym or letting loose with friends weren’t able to during the lockdown.” Many of those who regularly see or speak with a psychiatrist, psychologist, or therapist/counselor did surprisingly well during the pandemic because they were already dialed in to mental health services and support. Patients like these knew what coping strategies were necessary to get them through this challenging time.

“If you intensely continue to avoid returning to all of your normal activities—even those that carry low risk—and your worry or fear is uncontrollable, occupies much of your thinking, and gets in the way of your daily activities and relationships, then you should speak with a mental health professional,” Dr. Gould says.

## **Living with fear—even if it’s low grade—is unsustainable and can be debilitating.**

“The concern is less about the intensity of your symptoms and more about their frequency and impact on your life,” says Dr. Gould. “If you constantly worry about your next panic attack, avoid anxious triggers, and experience dread throughout the day, I recommend seeking professional help to learn ways to manage the anxiety and improve your quality of life.”

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