

The Nervous Person's Guide to Re-entering Society

How to cope with a less cautious world as pandemic restrictions loosen.





Credit...Chloe Cushman



By Christina Caron

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Amy Beigel, a fifth-grade teacher in Charlotte, N.C., has already had Covid-19. Her husband did, too. And now both of them have received their first dose of the vaccine. But when she thinks about gathering with other people outdoors this summer, she hesitates.

The desire to see friends and extended family is definitely there, said Ms. Beigel, 40, a mother of four. “But then we shoot the idea down.”

There are the weighty questions: “What if people came and did get sick?” she asked. The social awkwardness: “You don’t want to put undue pressure on someone.” And the logistical details: “Do you serve food?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe it’s too complicated.”

For the last year, public health experts have told us time and again that if you don't socially distance and wear a mask, you could die. So, as more people get vaccinated and we accelerate toward a new normal, is it any wonder that some people are feeling hesitant to [let go of those precautions](#)?

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The official recommendations have already started to change. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now says that fully vaccinated people can [travel safely](#) in the United States; and that people in a fully vaccinated household can visit an [unvaccinated household](#) indoors without masks or social distancing, provided that they are at low risk for severe Covid-19. As we approach summer, the agency may further loosen guidelines if coronavirus cases plummet.

We asked experts how best to ease back into society as our worlds broaden beyond life at home.

If you don't want to jump into the pool, dip your toe in first.

For those who have remained cautious throughout the pandemic, it's normal to feel unmoored by fewer safety precautions.

"It would be disingenuous for us to say, 'Eh, you're fine. Go for it, it's all good now,'" said Dr. Joshua Barocas, an infectious diseases physician at Boston Medical Center.

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Instead, find incremental ways of phasing back into interactions with people, he recommended.

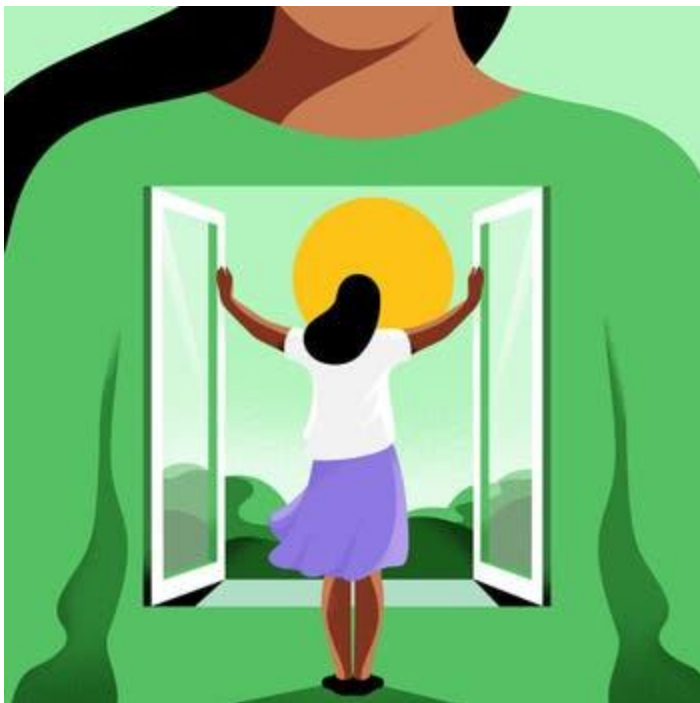
Dr. Barocas likened it to jumping into a cold swimming pool. If you can't bring yourself to do a cannonball, first you dip one toe in and enter gradually.

Sharrona Pearl, 43, who lives in Philadelphia and is fully vaccinated, said she recently decided that it felt OK to have a cup of tea indoors with a vaccinated friend.

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“I have three kids who are not vaccinated,” she said. “It’s really hard because they can’t have friends over for play dates, right? They just can’t. It’s not OK. So here I am doing it — that’s sort of frustrating for them.”

Hosting a friend indoors is just one of “dozens of points of re-entry,” said Ellen Hendriksen, a clinical psychologist in Boston and the author of “How to Be Yourself: Quiet Your Inner Critic and Rise Above Social Anxiety.”

You might start out by taking public transportation once a week, for example, or visiting the grocery store more often. Eventually, you might gradually work your way up to something like a wedding or a graduation.

This is assuming, of course, that you want to do these things.

If you don't yet, that's OK. But it's best to address your worries if they are preventing you from living the way that you want to live, or keeping you from activities that give your life meaning and purpose.

Anxiety is maintained by avoidance and driven by uncertainty, Dr. Hendriksen said.

Don't wait for the anxiety to go away.

As long as things you want to do are considered safe or very low risk, don't wait until the day when you have zero anxiety about doing them.

"Feeling anxious doesn't mean you're in danger, doesn't mean something is wrong," Dr. Hendriksen said. In fact, she added, it is a normal part of entering post-pandemic life.

It can be helpful to engage in calming, validating self-talk, suggested Lina Perl, a clinical psychologist in New York City. Speak to yourself in a safe, reassuring voice, much like an encouraging parent might do with their child on the first day of school.

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Ask yourself, "What kind of world do I want to live in? Have I done all the things I have to do to make me safe?" Dr. Perl said. Then think about the tough things you've done before and how you pushed through them.

"In order to live in the world, you need to be able to tolerate a certain amount of uncertainty and a certain amount of risk," she said. When you start doing something new, "It can be uncomfortable, but the more you do it, the less power it has over you."

"Think of your nervous system like a pet," she added. Train your nervous system to recognize that you are not in danger by doing the very activities that might make you a little anxious. Once you're in that situation, try to stay there until the anxiety starts to fade, she said.

But if your anxiety is bringing disproportionate distress or your life is impaired in some way, the experts said you may want to speak with a therapist or other trusted support person like a religious leader, who can guide and nudge you in a positive direction.

You do not have to replicate what you did in the 'before times.'

One positive aspect of the pandemic is that it has made us question the things in our lives that were draining, such as overbooking our social calendar or commuting to work five days a week, and embrace positive things like spending more time with family. It

also led to [new habits](#) that help us avoid disease, such as mask-wearing, which wasn't typically done in the United States.

Even after coronavirus cases and death rates plummet, you can choose to hold on to some of the current public health recommendations if it helps ease your fears. Frequent hand-washing? Great, that's beneficial against a host of pathogens. Wearing face masks during the winter? It's not only reasonable but prudent if you take public transportation regularly or live in a place with high population density. Some people might also choose to continue to wear masks in any situation where they are surrounded by large groups of people. Others might forgo handshakes in favor of [elbow taps or a hand-over-heart gesture](#).

Don't compare yourself to what other people are doing or look to others for the right answer. "That, I think, actually creates more of an anxious churn," Dr. Perl said.

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Let go of resentment.

As the adage goes, you cannot control other people, only yourself. Anger, frustration and resentment toward people who either ignore public health guidelines or behave differently than you do will only raise your stress level.

Instead of thinking, "Those people should be wearing a mask right now," try thinking, "I wish those people were wearing a mask." The two statements are similar, but the latter can help temper our emotional reaction, Dr. Hendriksen said.

The C.D.C. continues to recommend masks and distancing in most situations. But when you're outside and at least six feet from other people, [the risks of contracting Covid-19 are very low](#) even if nobody is wearing a mask, experts say. That's especially true if you are vaccinated.

Prioritize activities that help reduce anxiety.

If you developed a love affair with processed foods and neglected fruits and vegetables during lockdown, start incorporating healthy foods back into your diet. And if you stopped exercising during the pandemic, start moving again. By taking care of your body you are also taking care of your mind.

Dr. John Ratey, an associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School who studies the effects of exercise on the brain, said aerobic exercise like a simple bike ride or brisk walk can help people with chronic anxiety or even those who are nervous about an upcoming test or an important meeting.

Exercise elevates brain activity, he said: “With that, you elevate the concentration of all these good neurotransmitters and neurohormones that we have that help us feel better, feel calmer, feel less anxious.”

See how you feel after putting in a half-hour of yoga or 15 minutes of aerobic exercise, Dr. Ratey said. Eventually, “you will increase your resilience and your ability to take challenges like going out without a mask or visiting your kids or your grandkids when everybody has the vaccine,” he said. “But it’s going to be a transition period, for sure.”

Christina Caron is a reporter for the Well section, covering mental health and the intersection of culture and health care. Previously, she was a parenting reporter, general assignment reporter and copy editor at The Times. [@cdcaron](#)