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CANADA

As the country reopens, these Canadians fear they'll be left behind. Here's why

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Excitement around reopening the economy has swept the country, but for some, the excitement is trumped by anxiety and a feeling that they're being left behind.

While COVID-19 lockdowns begin to ease, some people are still on the sidelines, waiting for their chance at a taste of normalcy. For reasons of health or protocol, they've been left to wait their turn.

The immunocompromised still tense up when someone comes too close on a sidewalk, some small business owners bristle at being told to stay closed while others are allowed to open, and many people don't have jobs to go back to, even as the economy reopens. The Star spoke to some of those Canadians to hear their concerns.

'Anxiety and uncertainty'

Walking down the street, Tristan Bauer wouldn't strike you as someone who'd be particularly at risk for serious complications from COVID-19.

But that's exactly the problem, says the 34-year-old who lives in Calgary with his wife.

Bauer takes medication that suppresses his immune system as part of an arthritis treatment. In the best of times, an infection can cause complications for him that are worse than they would be for someone with a healthier immune system and can even result in a hospital visit.

He worries about what happens if he contracts COVID-19. "I'm in a situation where I actually have to worry that I might not be leaving my wife in a good situation because I might not be around.

"For me, there's a lot of, I'll say, anxiety and uncertainty."

It could be some time before he can return to anything resembling normal life, so it's a concern for Bauer that many people don't wear masks or respect physical distancing rules.

For him, those people could be the spark that leads to a trip to the hospital. He says the scores of people who want things to return to the way they were should take heed and remember that "there are a huge number of people that are truly at risk.

"We keep joking that the whole world needs to relearn how to interact with other humans," Bauer said. "But that's a lot more true than most of us would ever want to admit."

When the help stops

On the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit providing \$2,000 per month, Signe Knutson says she's actually able to provide a decent life for herself and her son in East Vancouver.

Normally, she works part time at a café. But she has lupus, which means she takes medication that suppresses her immune system.

"When the CERB came in, it was really like a blessing for me," she said. "Because finally, I have a livable income.

"It's not because I'm lazy. It's not because I don't have an education. It's not because I don't want to work that I have never had a good income — it's just because of my disability and I have a child who's in school."

But her CERB payments are going to stop soon since they're nearing the end of the 16-week threshold. Because she's immunocompromised, she doesn't feel comfortable going back to the café. Since she's technically able to work part time, Knutson says she can't go on disability either.

"I am feeling anxiety about going back to work," she said. "If I get sick, then nobody's going to be able to take care of my son."

Waiting for the show to go on

As certain parts of the economy reopen, some small business owners say they've been left to watch on the sidelines, confused and frustrated about why they weren't included.

In a situation that perplexed David Bird, his Port Elmsley Drive-In Theatre in Perth, Ont., wasn't part of the initial stages of reopening in that province.

"We're a little frustrated," he said in an email to the Star recently. "I like to say that drive-ins were social distancing before social distancing was cool. We invented the concept."

After some anxious weeks, the drive-in posted on its Facebook page Saturday that it had finally received word it can open, and plans to do so next weekend.

Clayton McAdam, who owns CrossFit gym Capital City Athletics in Edmonton, says he's confused about why he can't open his business.

Typically, he said a class at his gym would contain about 14 people. But he said it would be easy to cut that in half and keep more than enough space between people, along with adding in strict cleanliness guidelines.

"I think it's, you know, a little bit unfair," he said. "We should be allowed to open with restrictions."

In Alberta, gyms are to remain closed in the initial stages of reopening that began in May and which allow restaurants and barbershops to open with restrictions.

McAdam said it was frustrating because it seemed the government had lumped gyms like his into the category of big box gyms, where crowds of people might go after work, for instance.

"I think there's some misunderstanding, for sure."

Nothing to go back to

Still others lost jobs in March that they'll never get back due to the financial havoc wreaked by the pandemic.

Amber D'Amico, a 37-year-old who lives in Coquitlam, B.C., was working with the Pacific National Exhibition (PNE) managing events, the brand and the digital side of the organization.

The non-profit, famous for its Playland amusement park in Vancouver, relied on D'Amico to plan events. She says it was a dream job until the pandemic turned her world upside down.

"It felt like a slow motion dream while it was all happening," she said. "It was surreal."

It ended swiftly in late March when her position was terminated amid an estimated \$50 million loss in revenue for the PNE. Many large events such as the PNE have been banned across the country due to how quickly the coronavirus spreads in crowds.

Now, D'Amico is at home with two kids while her husband drives a recycling truck for the city of Burnaby.

She says it's a silver lining that she can spend so much time with family, but nagging at her is the knowledge that her CERB payments will soon dry up. And when the economy begins to reopen, she'll have no job to go back to.

D'Amico has a degree in marketing and is a seasoned event planner, but with the B.C. government indicating that large events won't be given the green light without a vaccine, she's been considering a new career.

"I feel like for special circumstances like this, we should have access to programs," she said. "This isn't my fault. I didn't do something and was dismissed from a job where I was negligent, or, you know, I've done something wrong."

"This was at no fault of my own, and now I'm struggling."

Update — May 30, 2020 — *This story has been updated to indicate that the Port Elmsley Drive-In now hopes to open next weekend.*



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