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LIFE

Are you feeling anxiety over the 'new normal' of Stage 2 reopenings? Experts explain why and how to cope

By **Jen Kirsch** Special to the Star

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Now that Toronto has entered Stage 2 of the [COVID-19](#) pandemic reopening, and we're allowed to begin integrating ourselves into a "new normal," I'm feeling the worse for wear.

I had been looking forward to seeing friends and loved ones in person (what a concept!), but even on recent distance visits — something I assessed as low risk and took every precaution while doing — I ended up feeling shame and guilt for even going out in the first place. And now, with things opening up further, I am not sure how I feel about taking the next step.

Is this who I am now? A single woman in her mid-30s who would rather be at home with her father (whom I have been staying with since the lockdown) than out in the world with friends, at restaurants, meeting people and enjoying a life I used to thrive in?

I have heard negative chatter in my head: "You're selfish for going out and enjoying yourself while so many people are suffering and dealing with loss." More thoughts: "All you care about is yourself. What if something happens to your dad? You couldn't be content just staying put? All that work you've done staying home the past few months has gone to waste."

The shame-spiral has continued and I feel like I have gone to a place of no return. Perhaps you can relate?

Are we all being overly skittish at attempting to reacclimate to a new normal?

"The anxiety we're experiencing with going back out in the world is normal," says Devra Igra, a Toronto clinical therapist who specializes in anxiety. She says the lockdown had a significant impact on people in many ways. "They shut the world down and told us it wasn't safe to go outside. Now we are being told it is safe, but we just aren't completely sure yet," Igra said.

She says skittishness is a normal response to anxiety. "We are a little more, 'Oh no, that person isn't wearing a mask and that person isn't far enough away from me.' It is important to normalize anxiety. It is an emotional response to the unknown, which is the period that we are in right now."

She says anxiety causes "spinnny" thoughts, which she describes as a series of thoughts tied together at a specific speed and tone, the indicator that rational thoughts are not connecting to the emotional distress and helping to reduce the anxiety.

For someone who goes down a rabbit hole of anxious thoughts, she suggests slowing down and trying to listen to your thoughts. "They are reassuring if you can connect to them," Igra said.

The rational thoughts are: I've been safe; I'm doing my best; the risk is low. I told her in a call that I would assume that staying home to avoid risk isn't the answer. So how can people integrate back into society without falling prey to fight/flight/freeze responses?

Igra says that fear and anxiety are related, but they are not the same. "Anxiety is that antenna that says, 'Hey, something doesn't feel right,' which is completely normal in this reintegration period. Fear is, 'I'm in danger. I'm at risk. I'm not OK,' and typically evokes a fight, flight or freeze response."

She says it can be scary to go out in the world at the moment because we know it isn't completely safe, but that doesn't mean that we aren't safe the moment that we step out into it. "It is important to see that we are safe re-engaging in day-to-day activities despite the looming unknowns if we practice the steps to stay safe," Igra said.

Once I got my head around the anxiety aspect, I reached out to Dr. Heidi Walk, a physician and psychologist who facilitates mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programs in Toronto. I asked her point blank if I'm being too mindful.

"A big part of mindfulness and honouring yourself is practising love and kindness," Walk said. "Mindfulness means the practice of paying attention in the present moment to whatever is arising in consciousness, recognizing thoughts, emotions, sensations, impulses, behaviours. It's the capacity to know while we are experiencing it."

"Are we being overly mindful? That's not mindfulness. That's a part of us that's scared. The motion is fear. The thoughts are: 'I'm being bad, I shouldn't do this, I shouldn't do that.'"

Decoding thoughts and emotions is very complex. She says the next piece is to give ourselves space to honour what's beneath and then bring in the rational part: I have been good. I haven't been taking risks.

If I look at the larger picture, the COVID-19 stats, especially in my suburban area outside of Toronto, the reality is the risk is low. The issue is arriving at that point where Walk says we can start to consider a way to be with ourselves.

"One possibility is to reach out to someone who is able to see the larger picture who is non-judgmental with us and more comforting to us," Walk said. "Another is to distract ourselves when feeling overwhelmed, by doing an activity that is self-care: having a lovely meal, playing with your favourite pet, going for a walk, or whatever is a self-soothing activity you can engage in if feeling overwhelmed."

Walk says this cultivation of "friendly attention" for the self "takes practice. It takes someone outside our box, a therapist, meditation, mindful programs. There's something as well about community. Other people are going through the same things you are and you're not alone here," she said.

"When scared, our tendency is to isolate and think we are the only ones going through something."



Jen Kirsch is a Toronto-based writer and a freelance contributor for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: [@jen_kirsch](https://twitter.com/jen_kirsch)

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