

INDY/LIFE



After over a year indoors, the idea of returning to socialising might be daunting for some. Kate Ng speaks to experts to get advice on how to overcome post-lockdown anxiety

Lockdown is lifting, temperatures are rising (somewhat), and there is an air of optimism that Britain just might beat this pandemic after all. Following months of working from home and staying away from friends, family and the outside world at large, we can finally take another step closer towards normality.

But for many of us, our pandemic-stricken lives have become a sort of normal. Returning to society as we knew it before can seem daunting - even scary - and navigating our social lives again can be a balancing act.

Our **mental health** has also taken a hit from the pandemic. Data from the Office for National Statistics suggests that twice as many adults in Britain had feelings of depression last autumn compared to before the crisis began, with **women and younger adults more likely to feel depressed** during the second virus peak earlier this year.

Data also suggests that people feel **anxiety** about lockdown lifting.

According to recent research by Anxiety UK, 46 per cent of more than 900 respondents said they were concerned about pressure to socialise, while 30 per cent feel anxious about going to a busy shopping centre.

So while it is exciting to be allowed to meet and hug family and friends again, visit the cinema or sit inside a restaurant, and potentially make plans to do things in the near future, a large number of people will feel the need to ease back into life as we knew it.

We spoke to experts about what you can do to cope with the anxiety around getting your **social life** back and how to make the most of our newfound freedoms.

I want to do everything, but socialising now is so tiring. How do I avoid becoming fatigued?

After England entered the second stage of lockdown easing - which saw pubs and restaurants reopen for outdoor service, and groups of six or two households were allowed to meet outdoors - many people spoke about how tiring it was to be socialising once again.

With even more freedoms returning, we might feel the urge to “make up for lost time” and over-stretch ourselves. But Dr Natasha Bijlani, consultant psychiatrist at the Priory’s Roehampton Hospital, says rushing into socialising “could topple your equilibrium”.

“Try not to say yes to everything even if you’re feeling the need to do everything all at once,” she advised. “Start up your interactions again slowly by meeting one friend, then you can gradually start meeting other people - building up from there can help you avoid social fatigue.”

Jemma Meeson, systemic psychotherapist and founder of the Family Treatment Service, adds:

“Wanting to go full tilt back into your previous life and ‘make up for lost time’ is understandable. In the excitement of this there may be a tendency to overdo it in all ways.

“Seeing lots of people after limited contact, which has mostly been online, can be overwhelming.

“Pace yourself, manage your alcohol intake, get proper rest and sleep so that when you go out, you can be your best self and enjoy the times that you choose to socialise. This will help manage the exhaustion you may feel with the new changes that are happening all around us.”

How do I overcome guilt about wanting to say no to plans?

The pressure to socialise may be exacerbated by the fact it has been some time before any of us have been able to do so meaningfully. However, if you want to say no to making plans, it shouldn’t be a problem among good friends.

“Be open with them about your feelings around coming out of lockdown,” said Ms Meeson. “If the plans don’t feel safe or feel too much at this stage - that’s ok - suggest alternatives.”

This could include suggesting plans to meet up outdoors or in smaller groups.

Dr Biljani adds that now may be a good time to do some “decluttering” of your social life and figuring out who your true friends are.

“During lockdown, people have thought more about the quality of their friendships and now may be a good time to step away from people who are taking more from you than giving,” she says.

“Because you haven’t seen the people who might be more likely to pressure you into socialising in a while, it might be a good time to disengage from them. Do some decluttering in your social circle and keep the friends you want around who will support you and be understanding about this strange and anxious time.”

How do I deal with anxiety about being out and around lots of people again?

It may be startling to see large numbers of people mingling in the same area, even if they are social distancing or wearing masks. We have gotten used to being in mostly-empty spaces when we do venture out, so we feel anxious by the sight of lots of people in one place.

“Remember we have all come through something extraordinary, it is not surprising or unusual to have these feelings of anxiety,” said Ms Meeson.

“Take it gently, start with plans you feel are manageable and take it from there. As you become more confident and perhaps start to enjoy the wider world if you can, also notice how you are feeling and if it feels overwhelming, get help.”

Keeping up to date with government and medical guidance around Covid-19, and ensuring you’re following the rules can also help manage anxiety, says Dr Bijlani.

“The virus has not yet been vanquished and so it is very normal that fears around contributing to the spread of Covid-19 are still there,” she says.

“Keeping yourself updated and following the rules can help give you an extra layer of reassurance in knowing that you are keeping yourself and those you live with safe. Do what makes you comfortable, but if you feel yourself becoming very anxious, try and talk yourself through it, manage your breathing.

“Introspection is very important, so check in with yourself from time to time. Monitor your inner dialogue and if you find that you can’t manage or control your thoughts, do seek help and give yourself that little bit more care and attention.”

How should I organise my social life as we come out of lockdown?

While the thought of being able to crack open our planners and actually schedule dates, outings and events might be exciting, it can also feel quite overwhelming. Ms Meeson’s advice is to think carefully about who, or what, you have missed during lockdown, when trying to make plans and prioritising them from there.

Both experts also recommend not ditching the good habits you may have accumulated during lockdown in favour of an overactive social life.

“Lots of people have found they have improved sleep habits, picked up exercising, cut down on drinking because they realised they don’t need it,” said Dr Bijlani. “Keep those good habits, and stick to a routine as much as you can because this will help reduce anxiety.

“When it comes to making plans, don’t overcommit and don’t be afraid of being selective. At the end of the day, you have to do what’s right for you.

However, don’t be a shut-in if you do feel it is safe to go outside and interact with people again. Human beings are social creatures and social interaction has been proven to be good for brain health, as well as promoting a sense of belonging and security.

“Socialising is an important part of the human connection,” says Dr Bijlani. “Don’t live in fear. It’s not healthy if people choose to isolate themselves. Seeing people in the flesh, talking and spending time with one another is really important.”