

UPDATE

May 2021

Adjusting to the Next “New Normal”

While we are all hopeful that the end of the Covid-19 pandemic is in sight, this final phase is presenting new stressors and challenges. It is an emotionally confusing time as it requires us to navigate feelings of optimism, uncertainty and potential disappointment. Many are anxious to return to “normal”, but there are also many who fear the anxieties they faced in that “normal” world. It is important as we move forward to create a new normal that serves our emotional health as well as physical well-being.

Short-Term Realism and Long-Term Goals: While activities that we once enjoyed are becoming possible again (going out to dinner, having friends over, live music and concerts), be sure to make plans that are within reach. Try to avoid disappointment in the short-term, especially with children, and plan events that are unlikely to be cancelled: outside gatherings with friends, trips camping or to a pool, etc. However, do not forget to let yourself and kids dream big for the future: sleepaway camps, concerts, etc. It's important to stay optimistic and excited.

Know Your Personal Social Limits: It is important to acknowledge that the pandemic may have revealed our true capacity and limits for social interaction. Many have found that they didn't realize how exhausted they were during pre-pandemic times with so much on their personal and social calendars. It is OK to set a max number of activities for a week or the weekend. Pace yourself, schedule “down” time and draw lines that will help you maintain stress levels.

Communicate and Respect Safety Boundaries: Your friends, family and neighbors all have different comfort levels and plans to stay safe as we are still in this pandemic. Be sure that you know your boundaries and clearly communicate them when making plans. Also ask, listen and be respectful of the boundaries of those you are interacting with. Comfort levels may shift, but continue to adhere to a safety plan that works for you.

Beyond jumping back into our social lives, the fact remains that more people are also returning to work and school. But a significant number are struggling to reintegrate. According to the April “Household Pulse” Survey conducted by the Center for Disease Control, 36% of Americans reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depression in April (compared to 11% in 2019). Another March-April, 2021 poll by the American Psychiatric Association, found that more than half of parents expressed concerns about their children.

For some children, the excitement of going back to school will outweigh potential anxiety. For others, the idea of in-person school feels overwhelming and will increase their anxiety. It is important for parents and caregivers to stay calm, stay positive and validate the feelings that children are expressing. Assure kids that nervous feelings or feelings of missing home are OK and reassure with words of pride for what they have accomplished or overcome. Try not to ask leading questions, such as “Are you nervous about school?”, rather focus on the positive questions, such as “What are you looking forward to?” It is also beneficial to adhere to a daily routine and Covid-safety plan that both parents and children help create. Plan a weekly check-in with your child to assess their needs and promote their strengths. Make sure that teachers and school staff are aware of your child's concerns and should the child's anxiety symptoms increase, be sure to get help from a therapist either in the school or your community.

The mental health concerns of children, adolescents and adults should continue to be assessed and addressed as we all shift into this next phase and our ‘new normal’. If any stress or symptoms increase, do not hesitate to seek professional help. Additionally, here are some fairly simple, scientifically proven tips that can help everyone manage stress and improve their mental health, especially during times of uncertainty and transition. These include: • Daily meditation • Getting out into nature • Exercise • Eating well • Getting seven hours of sleep • Social engagement • Unplugging from the news and social media. These same coping skills that were emphasized at the start of the pandemic should never be forgotten as they are the same tools that will help us transition out of the pandemic and can benefit our mental health every day beyond.

<https://childmind.org/article/encouraging-optimism/>

<https://www.massgeneral.org/news/coronavirus/post-pandemic-anxiety-feeling-stressed-as-things-return-to-normal>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/why-getting-back-to-normal-may-actually-feel-terrifying>

<https://www.npr.org/2021/04/04/983855924/do-we-even-know-how-to-socialize-anymore>

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm>

<https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/apa-public-opinion-poll-2021-annual-meeting>