

Why Do We Feel Uneasy About a ‘New Normal’?

June 15, 2020

Ever since we were first confined to our homes, we’ve daydreamed about the return to normal life, from the exhilarating to the mundane. We want to visit our favourite pubs, theatres or shops, and we suddenly feel an odd nostalgia for taking the train, trying on new clothes or even [shaking hands](#).

But as mandatory lockdowns around the world start to ease and businesses slowly open their doors, many of us who are not healthcare providers or essential workers are facing a puzzling dilemma: we feel anxious about resuming our normal routines, even though they’re precisely what we’ve been looking forward to.

We can’t predict exactly how our workplaces and commutes will change to combat coronavirus risks. Still, as we gear up to resume life outside the home, understanding the causes behind our apprehension is key to successfully managing the transition when the time finally comes.

What, exactly, makes us feel uneasy about our looming return to work? BBC Worklife spoke to Dr Karen Cassiday, clinical psychologist and managing director of The Anxiety Treatment Center of Greater Chicago, and Dr David Rosmarin, founder of the Center for Anxiety in New York and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, about the contributing factors.

...

When tackling a problem, having a defined role can make us feel like we’re more in control of the situation, adds Cassiday. But due to the nature of the pandemic, we’ve been forced into a position of powerlessness. “We are, in effect, being asked to do nothing by staying at home... We all cope better with uncertainty when we feel like there is something specific that we can do to make things better and solve a problem.” Returning to work may provide structure to our days, but it will not remedy this feeling of powerlessness over the pandemic.

And despite the downsides of living in quarantine, the few benefits that *have* emerged will make the transition back to work even more stressful when they’re taken away, says Rosmarin. “More sleep due to less commuting and working time, more time with family and less social pressure” are things many of us will miss once lockdown lifts.

“So, if people have mixed emotions about the ‘return to normal’ that seems perfectly healthy and expected to me,” he says.

Is it OK to feel a bit emotionally exhausted?

“Definitely and a half,” says Rosmarin. Even after lockdown lifts, he expects symptoms of depression, anxiety, irritability and even anger to persist for several months – in many cases triggered

by [relationship troubles](#), which can be exacerbated by such a long period in close quarters.

“There are clear trends that marital strife and even domestic abuse have been on the rise,” says Rosmarin, “especially in families that were struggling before the pandemic.” For the millions who have [lost work](#) or been furloughed, the financial insecurity has only intensified emotional exhaustion. Parents are having to decide when children should return to school and if facilities are opening up. There’s also navigating the process of working out what’s best not just for you, but for those you love – it’ll likely continue through the summer and beyond.

Work pressure, meanwhile, may not have let up; people who find themselves caught in [endless work-related Zoom meetings](#) are no more immune to mental fatigue. “The strain of trying to read other people’s expressions and interact when there is a short time delay due to the video feed is very tiring,” says Cassiday. “We have to expend more effort just to interact on videoconferencing than we would if we were face to face or on a phone call.” The stress that comes from these kinds of interactions also elevates our cortisol levels, which can in turn disrupt the quality of our sleep and moods, she adds.

Cassiday and Rosmarin agree that it won’t be easy to shake lockdown-induced exhaustion as we begin to readjust to a standard routine – and that it’s okay to ease into the transition. “This has been a bona fide international crisis of the highest order and the disruption will likely have impact [sic] on our emotional states for some time,” says Rosmarin.

...