

How Do We Safely Transition Out of Quarantine?

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As restrictions surrounding COVID-19 have started to be relaxed, there has been a combination of feelings. Excitement that we can finally get out of our homes more. Anticipation to stroll around local parks and lie out on the beach. And relief that possibly things will start to return to normal (or some kind of new normal).

However, with all of these feelings of excitement and relief, comes feelings of worry, fear, hesitancy, and reluctance. Many clients are expressing a mix of thoughts about how much they miss being with their friends and family and wanting to have some semblance of a summer, including BBQs and days at the beach. These thoughts have been happening alongside thoughts such as “Maybe this is too soon.” “How do I know I can be safe?” “How do I know I can help keep my family safe when I visit them?” “Are the stores and restaurants I want to go to going to take the necessary precautions?” “How can I feel comfortable going out and being around people again?”

The unfortunate truth is that we don’t have all the answers for this yet. We may not have a clear idea for quite some time. So how do you start to transition back out when there is still so much uncertainty?

START THE CONVERSATION ABOUT ENDING QUARANTINE

First off, if you are living with others, have a discussion about it. And not just a one-time discussion. This might be a process of assessing what your family feels comfortable with and taking it day-by-day.

Other factors, such as pre-existing conditions or other risks, may influence your decision on where you feel comfortable going. A lot of future arguments can be avoided by discussing and making a decision together. Some individuals have felt frustrated after one of their family members ventured out to see relatives or went to a store without first discussing the decision with family. The upsetness was less about the act of going out somewhere and more about not first having a conversation about it.

MAKE A PLAN TO EASE YOUR ANXIETY

A colleague of mine was feeling more and more comfortable with going out to the supermarket, but doing it safely. Her son was struggling with this. He had a great deal of fear with going as he

hadn't ventured out much since the start of the quarantine. She sat down with him and had a conversation about making sure they chose a store that appeared to be taking the right precautions where they would feel the most comfortable.

Despite his continued fear about this, she supported him, but also challenged him saying, "We got this. We are going to do this safely, and we'll be ok." They went out together to the local supermarket and entered the store. They agreed not to stay long and would just get some essentials. He found that he felt less worried than he thought once they were in there and even stayed for longer! This was the first step in helping him feel safer when going out.

After coming to an agreement with the members of your household that it feels like the right time to start getting out more often or going to some more places that have reopened, make a list.

This can be a list of a few places you'd like to start going to that you have felt uncomfortable with previously. Maybe, you haven't felt comfortable going into the supermarket and have been doing delivery since the quarantine started. Give yourself realistic expectations for this. Choose a time that might be less busy. Give yourself a time limit for how long you think you will feel comfortable. This might be a plan to only get a few essentials for the first trip and leaving after no more than 20 minutes. The second time you go, you might feel comfortable to push it a little longer. Maybe, you have been wanting to feel more comfortable seeing your relatives. Perhaps a first step could be simply saying "hi" from the driveway.

I WANT TO FEEL READY NOW!

Some of you reading this may be saying "This seems like a really slow process. I've been ready to start doing these things for a while now."

You're right! It has felt like forever and I know a lot of us are ready to start getting back out there and seeing people. But we need to make sure we are smart about it and following the recommendations by the CDC. This will most likely mean continuing to wear face coverings, keeping distance from others, and keeping most activities outdoors. And this might mean that we will have to wait longer before being around loved ones who have pre-existing conditions.

I know how to diagnose and treat a multitude of mental health issues (and I can cook a mean chicken parm), but I'm not an expert in this area, which is why I'm going to follow the recommendations by the experts in this area, medical professionals, and guidelines set forth by the CDC.

Even when I'm feeling frustrated that I can't yet get a haircut or go to a movie theater, the health of others and my family are far more important.

MAYBE IT IS TOO SOON TO END QUARANTINE...

Others reading this might be thinking, "Pump the brakes! This is way too soon to start going to the beach, going to stores more often, or visiting loved ones."

You might be right! The reality is that we really don't know if things are reopening too soon. Numbers of COVID-19 cases are still high and there won't be a vaccine for what looks to be quite a long time. That's okay! Do what you feel most comfortable with right now for you and your family. This might be a good time to start working on some techniques and skills for when you are feeling more ready to get out more often. Perhaps you are working at a job that is starting to transition back to working in the office and you want to better prepare yourself for that time.

When our brain perceives a threat, whether it's right in front of us or invisible like the coronavirus, our body kicks into "fight or flight" mode. This is our mind and body's way of surviving and keeping us on high alert. However, this can be dialed up too high and not allow us to make good decisions and can get in the way of us living our lives.

So how do you "turn the dial down" from 11, as they say in *Spinal Tap*?

Start with some relaxation techniques. These can run the gamut of slow deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, or guided imagery. Other options might include practicing yoga, baking, exercise, writing, and other activities that will bring your stress level down.

When you are feeling more ready to start transitioning out of quarantine, you will feel more equipped to manage your anxiety.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD AND PRIORITIZE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

We've never faced something like this before. We don't have all the answers on when and how we start to transition back to "normal life," whatever that new normal will look like.

There is no doubt that the coronavirus and being quarantined may have lasting effects on our mental health. However, feeling more equipped to manage our stress and anxiety can limit its impact.

If you are feeling like you could use some extra help with making a plan, learning some techniques, or just having a safe space to talk about these fears, don't hesitate to reach out. A licensed mental health professional will work with you and help you take the first steps to feel safer again.

No one needs to do this alone and chances are, we'll have more success working together in this scary and uncertain time.