

Social Anxiety after Lockdown



“I learned years ago that it’s okay to do this. To seek out small spaces for me, to stop and imagine myself alone. People are too much sometimes.”

- Francesca Zappia, author

“Extroversion is an enormously appealing personality style, but we’ve turned it into an oppressive standard to which most of us feel we must conform.”

- Susan Cain, author

Many have struggled with the lack of social activity that came with lockdown measures to combat COVID-19. A study by the Mental Health Foundation reported that one in four respondents had felt lonely during lockdown. Many of the population will be delighted that lockdown restrictions are changing as you can meet your friends, visit family or even return to work with social distancing.

On the other hand, those who suffer with social anxiety may have relished this break from social interactions and their mental health may reflect this. Those with social anxiety have had months without the social situations that cause them great anxiety, have had a very valid reason for not socially interacting or are finding their social activity much less stressful because there is less of it or it is distanced.

But now, as things ease, we may be concerned about our social anxiety. After having months of respite, will the anxiety be worse as we re-emerge into society? If you are suffering with social anxiety and would like further support, please get in touch with our AdviceLine and one of our counsellors will be happy to help.

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What is social anxiety?

Social anxiety disorder, sometimes called social phobia, is a long-term and overwhelming fear of social situations. It can be very distressing and have a big impact on your mental and physical health. Many of us occasionally get anxious about social interactions. But, social anxiety is a fear that does not go away and impacts everyday activities, self-confidence, relationships and work or school life. This is an intense anxiety triggered before, during and after social interactions.

Social anxiety can manifest differently between individuals. The following can be signs you are suffering with social anxiety.

- ▶ Avoiding or worrying a lot about social activities, such as parties, work events, group conversations, or spending a day with company
- ▶ Worrying about doing something you think is embarrassing or 'wrong', such as saying the wrong thing, blushing, stuttering, sweating
- ▶ Worrying about everyday activities, such as starting conversations, speaking on the phone, meeting strangers, being at work, or shopping
- ▶ Finding it difficult to do things when others are watching or feeling like people are watching you when they are not
- ▶ Fear of being criticised or having low self-esteem
- ▶ Physical symptoms: racing heart, tremors, sweating, feeling sick or being extremely tired after socialising
- ▶ Having panic attacks when in or anticipating social interactions



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How to manage post-lockdown social anxiety

As we see lockdown restrictions lift, and we begin to reemerge into society, many of us will experience social anxiety and are likely to be feeling very worried about this after months of isolation or low social activity. There are things you can do to manage and reduce this anxiety.

- ▶ **Know it will be hard and tiring.** After months of lockdown with little or no social interaction, and much of this done virtually, it is important that you understand your return to higher levels of social interaction is going to be difficult. You will likely feel overwhelmed and more anxious than usual. Understand this is completely natural. Try to remember that most people, even those who do not suffer with social anxiety, will likely be anxious about social interactions for some time.
- ▶ **Prepare.** Learn some coping techniques now, in comfortable situations which you can then put in practise in difficult social situations. A really useful technique is simply to focus on your breathing. One method of this is known as square breathing: inhale for 4 seconds, hold that breath for 4 seconds, exhale for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds, and repeat until you feel your anxiety begin to lessen. It may also be helpful to download some apps that help you with anxiety. PanicShield, Rootd and My Safe Zone are great for guiding you through an anxiety or panic attack.

- ▶ **Let others know.** Tell a friend or family member that you are worried about your social anxiety as lockdown eases. Anxiety can be greatly helped simply by talking through your worries. A lot of anxiety comes from catastrophising - elevating a situation to the worst possible scenario. A trusted peer can help you to step back and see a situation how it really is.
- ▶ **Think about the positives.** There are likely some aspects of your daily life you have missed during lockdown: a stroll around the library, your favourite coffee shop, the cinema. Remember that lockdown easing means you may have access to these things again. Focus on what you can gain from lockdown easing rather than what you are fearful of. There are likely even some social interactions you are comfortable with and have missed. Use these moments you are comfortable with to ease your worries about further interactions.



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- ▶ **Ease yourself in.** Although lockdown measures may be lifting, this does mean you have to thrust yourself back into social situations. Feel comfortable saying “no” to things or that you are not ready yet. You may be tempted to dive back into social activities to “get it over with”. But this method doesn’t work for everybody. Make sure you take things at your own pace, people will be especially understanding at the moment if you are not ready for some social activities.
- ▶ **Talk with your employer.** One of the larger causes of post-lockdown social anxiety is the fear of returning to work. Whether we have been working from home, furloughed or are looking for a new job, returning to the workspace can cause great distress. This can be because of many reasons: busy transport on commute, crowded office, lots of meetings, customer interactions, social events after work. If it is possible, you should speak to your manager and express your concerns. Let them know that your anxiety levels have been greatly reduced during lockdown. Ask them if there is the possibility of working from home for longer, perhaps even just a couple of days a week to give you a needed break. It is always good to let your employer know so that they can be aware of your anxieties and make any changes they can to help.
- ▶ **Push yourself.** Although it can be very frightening and difficult, try to challenge yourself regularly. These challenges do not have to be massive. It can simply be asking a barista how their day has been, or it could be bigger, maybe accepting the invitation to a party that you would usually decline. These moments will slowly help your anxiety to lessen and you will begin to feel more in control and confident.



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- **Be kind to yourself.** This is going to be a tough period for those suffering with social anxiety. Try to be easy on yourself, don't expect that you won't have any issues with your anxiety. Make sure to take time for yourself: watch a movie, have a bath, go for a run, get a takeaway. It may also help you to put together a "relaxation kit" for at the end of a day when you have a difficult interaction. This could be a little box with your favourite chocolate, a bath bomb, a colouring book and a cosy jumper. Whatever helps you to relax, put it together somewhere so that you can quickly grab it and begin to wind down.
- **Evaluate the situation.** If you know that a certain social situation triggers your anxiety, step back from this and look at the scenario in detail. If you can identify what exact aspect of a social interaction might be causing your anxiety, it will be easier for you to take steps to reduce it. Try to look at areas such as who the individual(s) is, how many people are present, the environment, even the time of day, is there food or alcohol involved, a dress code.
- **Congratulate yourself.** It is important that you recognise the moments when you accomplished something - big or small. If you made an effort to push yourself in social situations, make sure you acknowledge this. You can simply think it, say it out loud, materially reward yourself or even keep a little journal of your accomplishments. These congratulations will not only reward you for your efforts, but encourage you in future scenarios.
- **Get support.** If you are finding your social anxiety is impacting your daily life or you feel overwhelmed by it, reach out for specialist support. There are lots of methods and people who can help you with your social anxiety. If you are unsure where to begin, the CiC AdviceLine is a great place to start. We are available for you 24/7, 365 and one of our team will help you in getting support for your social anxiety.

