
ANXIETY AFTER LOCKDOWN

As we continue the fight against coronavirus (COVID-19), and Northern Ireland's government regulations (coronavirus restrictions) change, many will experience various levels of unease and anxiety.

Most of us have been isolated at home, our lives confined to the small circle of family or close friends with whom we live; some people have been on their own. Government restrictions called for remote working and limited social interactions in order to collectively combat the pandemic.

To move beyond such a sudden and abnormal new reality may seem daunting, given that COVID-19 remains an issue across the globe and further, localised lockdowns are a real prospect. However, it is important for our mental health and wellbeing to try to adapt as best we can and reclaim some sense of normality.

You may be feeling fearful, understandably, while also wanting to pick up where you left off. So, we have created some easy-to-follow steps for you to follow:

- The easing of lockdown brings with it both hope and worry. Plan for, manage and enjoy those things you can control. Don't let these cause you to be fearful or anxious.
- Try something that challenges you every day, or every few days. Be realistic, keep going and don't beat yourself up if you don't achieve everything first time round.
- Vary your routine to gradually expose yourself to different situations.
- Set your own pace. Don't be pressured into doing things you're not ready to do. Keep in mind that reconnecting with the world will aid your progress.
- Many employers are taking a flexible approach with employees. If you are struggling to return to work because of anxiety, consult with your manager or trusted colleagues. You may also be entitled to reasonable adjustments if you have, or have had, a diagnosed mental health condition.

Government regulations now require members of the public to wear face coverings across both nose and mouth when in shops and on public transport.

Health professionals have advised that COVID-19 is much less likely to be transmitted in the open air, especially if people are keeping their distance from each other; however, **the risks go up significantly indoors**, where infections can spread quickly in enclosed and poorly ventilated spaces.

Wearing a face covering across one's nose and mouth can be an effective tool in slowing down the proliferation of the virus.

For some, including those living with mental ill health, these regulations may prove daunting. Claustrophobia, sensory overload, anxiety or panic are just some of the challenges they might encounter. If you are especially self-conscious, wearing a face covering – even if everyone else is doing it – can cause negative emotions. Even seeing others with face coverings, which are visible reminders of the public health situation, might activate overwhelming emotions.

Stay focused on why you are wearing the face covering. It may be uncomfortable initially but remember that it will protect you and others. As with anything new, you will soon become accustomed to it. All current guidance on when, where and how to utilise face coverings is available from [NI Direct](#).

Here are some tips to help make the experience easier.

When wearing a face covering induces anxiety, panic or breathing issues:

- Get some fresh air before and after wearing your face covering.
- Engage in a relaxing activity – like a breathing exercise to calm you down – before and after you cover your nose and mouth.
- Try to keep cool as possible. This will make you more relaxed.
- Limit your time with the face covering by planning what you're going to buy in shops.

Physical discomfort and negative feelings:

- Experiment with different fabric types. Covering your nose and mouth is key but it doesn't need to be uncomfortable.
- Experiment with methods of securing your face covering. Some fit round the ears, some tie behind the head.
- Choose another type of covering that fits on your face differently, like a snood.
- Think of your face covering as a fashion accessory. Search for something with a design or pattern that expresses who you are or matches your clothes. You could even use a scarf or bandana.

Anxiety around other people wearing face coverings:

- Focus elsewhere when communicating. You could shift your body so that you're side by side with the person, both looking in the same direction.
- Pay extra attention to your physical environment: trees, traffic, window displays, or the sounds and smells you notice. Doing so might calm you.
- Distract yourself by, for example, listening to music or podcasts through headphones, or calling a friend for a chat.
- If someone you have to see often (like a friend or housemate) wears a face covering and that unnerves you, have a gentle conversation with them about how you feel.

Being supportive to others:

- Don't judge people who are not wearing face coverings. Be aware that their reasons may not always be visible.
- In certain circumstances, some people are relieved from the requirement to wear face coverings. If someone says that they are excused, take their word for it.
- The Executive has outlined 'reasonable excuses' for not wearing a face covering at all times on public transport and in shops. These exemptions are outlined [here](#) by NI Direct.
- Acknowledge people. You could offer a friendly word or wave as you pass.
- Try using your voice, eyes, hands and body language to communicate.
- If you see someone regularly who is uncomfortable with face coverings, ask that person about what would help.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has posted a helpful infographic on the effective use of face coverings [here](#). More detailed information is also available on the [WHO website](#).

Wearing a face covering is just one way of cutting down on transmission. Washing your hands and keeping your distance remain as important as before.

For WHO guidance on COVID-19 and mental health, visit:

- [Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak](#)
- [Coping with stress during the 2019-nCoV outbreak](#)

We have all been learning new forms of working and staying connected — feelings of unease, now, are to be expected. By continuing to take sensible measures, and by following the advice of health professionals, we can limit the potential impact that COVID-19 has on our wellbeing.

Some useful resources for looking after your **emotional and mental health** during this time are linked to below.

- [Anger](#)
- [Anxiety](#)
- [Depression](#)
- [Stress](#)
- [Wellbeing](#)

And remember, if you are in distress or despair, you can also call Lifeline on:

0808 808 8000

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