

# HOW TO NAVIGATE SOCIAL SITUATIONS AFTER MONTHS OF COVID-19 ISOLATION

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The resumption of social events and interactions following months of COVID-19 pandemic isolation will look differently for different people.

This means friends, family members and coworkers in a person's life will likely land on various areas of the spectrum, based on their own comfort levels and their individual risk assessments.

Martin M. Antony, professor of psychology at Ryerson University, said these differences will range from people who will continue to not leave their home, to people who have been leaving their home for months prior to it being deemed safe to do so.

"We're going to see that full range as we come out of it, with people being maybe too comfortable to the point of potentially taking risks that are not recommended, to people not able to leave their house at a time where everybody else is back at work,"

he added.

Thomas Ungar, psychiatrist-in-chief at St. Michael's Hospital of Unity Health Toronto, agreed.

At a recent Ontario Medical Association forum, Ungar addressed what coming out of the pandemic could look like, noting a small percentage of people will likely be "partying like nothing happened," while others will be more reluctant or fearful.

He added that people are resilient and most will experience feelings of anxiety and depression that are expected; however, a very small subset of people who had pre-existing mental health issues prior to the pandemic "may need some extra support (or) actual treatment."

## CAUSES OF ANXIETY

Antony said there are a number of factors contributing to people's feelings of anxiety as they begin entering into social situations again — a primary one being uncertainty around guidelines and what is safe and unsafe, as there are inconsistencies in

the measures implemented here and in other countries around the world.

As well, he said, when people find something difficult to do, but haven't done it in a long time, it only makes it more difficult to resume. This challenge may be felt by those who, in pre-COVID times, already had a fear of contamination or anxiety when in social settings.

"Many people get anxious eating with other people and having to make small talk," he said. "Having not done it for a long time and being out of practice will make that more anxiety-provoking for some people."

## MITIGATING FEARS AND ANXIETY

In an interview, Ungar said the best way to deal with COVID-related fears and anxieties is to first acknowledge that feeling a little bit of anxiety is healthy and normal.

He said the best way to overcome those feelings is with gradual exposure, while keeping within public health guidelines.



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Different people will have varying levels of comfort as they resume social activities as the province continues to reopen, experts say.

"Negotiating that gradual re-entry is going to be a little bit awkward and nerve-racking," he said. "Allow yourself to feel that, but try to do a little bit of it anyways."

Chatting about these anxious feelings, or bouncing ideas off people you trust, can also help.

"Usually when we do things with others, it's nice, if we have that luxury, because we're going through the same experience together," he said.

## NAVIGATING CONFLICT AND DISAGREEMENT

Antony said another common challenge people will face is disagreeing with certain family members and friends about COVID-related comfort levels.

Antony advises Ontarians to "be patient with people who are not where you're at." He added that the more you pressure people to do something, the more they tend to "dig in their heels" and not want to do those things.

Ungar noted it is important for people to focus on themselves and do what they need to feel safe.

"You can really only control and be responsible for yourself and allow others the same freedom," he said.

"But if that means that you're having a birthday party for your kid and an uncle or aunt isn't vaccinated and doesn't want to be, you are free to not invite them or not allow them in," he added.

"And that's awkward, but again, you can only control yourself."

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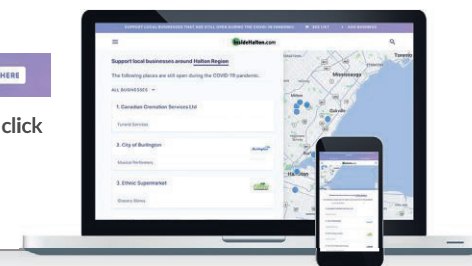


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