

21062 Start Retraining for Social Interactions

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As the days grow warmer and vaccination shots reach more arms, you may be looking ahead to getting out and about. An Axios-Ipsos poll released this month found that “the number of Americans engaging in social interactions outside the home is increasing.” And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently issued new recommendations that individuals who have been vaccinated against the coronavirus can start to gather in small groups, without masks, offering a measure of hope in particular to those who have missed the intimacy of double dates and dinner parties.

But after a year spent internalizing public health precautions for social distancing and mask-wearing, the prospect of readjusting to in-person social engagements may be a daunting one. For many, it provokes a sense of profound discomfort, apprehension or ambivalence.

“It’s a new version of anxiety,” said Dr. Lucy McBride, an internist in Washington who writes a newsletter about managing the coronavirus crisis. You may discover that your continuing concerns about the virus are colliding with a new set of worries about seeing others more regularly: What am I comfortable with? How do I act? What do I say?

“There’s two feelings that are continuing to exist for me,” said Allison Harris-Turk, 46, an events and communications consultant and mother of three in San Diego. Mrs. Harris-Turk created the Facebook group Learning in the Time of Corona, where many among the roughly 16,700 members are discussing the pros and cons of re-entry. “There’s the excitement and the optimism and the hope, and then there’s also the grief and the trauma and ‘oh, my goodness, how are we going to recover from this?’”

If you’re wary of re-entry, begin with a lower-stakes outing. “It’s like little baby steps getting back into it,” said Dr. David Hilden, a Minneapolis-based internist who hosts a weekly radio show during which he answers listeners’ pandemic questions. He’s observed this firsthand: Earlier this month, he met up with a friend to share a beer for the first time since the onset of the pandemic. “Now that we’ve dipped our toe in the water, a lot of Zoom meetings end with, ‘Hey, I think we can get together now,’” he said.

But even extroverts may experience an adjustment period as our brains adapt to planning and monitoring responses to unfamiliar situations. At the beginning of the pandemic, people had to change their behaviors to comply with social distancing, mask-wearing and sheltering in place. But learning those new behaviors — and now, relearning old ones — can take a cognitive toll.

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