

UW Health: Offers tips for easing transition to post-pandemic life

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Contact: Emily Kumlien

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(608) 516-9154

ekumlien@uwhealth.org

UW Health Psychologist offers tips for easing transition to post-pandemic life

MADISON, Wis.—According to a study by the American Psychological Association (APA), Americans are still reporting extremely high levels of stress about the pandemic. However, as vaccination rates increase and the end of the pandemic is seemingly within reach, more people are reporting anxiety around returning to in-person interaction and resuming life as it was pre-pandemic. This was true regardless of whether the person had received the COVID-19 vaccine or not.

And now, with the recent changes to CDC guidelines and the ending of many local mandates about masking and social distancing, it is completely normal for many people to be feeling a sense of anticipatory anxiety and uncertainty about adjusting to the new normal.

According to Shilagh Mirgain, UW Health distinguished psychologist, there are things all people can do to help themselves transition effectively to a post-pandemic life:

- **Adjust to these new guidelines at your own pace:** Many people who are

vaccinated are feeling a lot of anxiety about not wearing a mask out in the world. For over a year, we've been told that masks were the best way to protect against the virus, so it makes sense that there is some anticipatory anxiety around not wearing a mask. Also, people should be mindful that others may continue to feel more comfortable wearing masks in public settings, either because they have young children (11 and under) who are not yet vaccinated, are immunocompromised, or just want to use this extra safety precaution because we know it is effective in preventing illness. Regardless of your position, it is important to be nonjudgmental about people's choices regarding mask wearing.

- **Be cautious, but don't avoid social situations:** In a pre-lockdown world, many people experienced a 'fear of missing out' (FOMO) on social events, but now many people are experiencing a 'fear of going out' (FOGO). It will be important to start taking small steps to do activities that the CDC deems safe, even if they are anxiety producing. It is detrimental to avoid social situations in the long run because doing so impairs quality of life and engagement in life. Recognizing that others will be feeling uncomfortable, too, normalizes the awkwardness we might be experiencing.
- **Commit to a personal health goal:** With warmer weather upon us, take this time to recommit to a personal health goal. Exercise is a proven method for dealing with anxiety and depression. Reflecting on what you want your life and health to look like can be a strong motivator in helping people take healthy action steps toward a better future.
- **Remember that the pandemic is not yet over:** Things are getting better, but we are not out of the woods yet. We must continue to be diligent, especially knowing that large pockets of people in our communities are still not vaccinated. Keep hand washing, keep social distancing in public settings, and keep making your physical and mental health a priority.

Mirgain acknowledges some people might need additional help to manage their anxiety or depression during this time and she encourages anybody who is feeling overwhelmed by their emotions to reach out to a behavioral health specialist.

Shilagh Mirgain is available for a limited number of Zoom interviews today. A pre-taped interview is available as well.

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