

Coping With Anxiety Amid COVID Surge

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More than a year and a half ago, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. According to a study done by the American Psychological Association (APA), since the start of the pandemic two in three Americans reported sleeping more or less than they wanted to, one in four essential workers have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, and around half of people say they feel uneasy about readjusting to in-person interaction post-pandemic. These are only a few of the alarming statistics surrounding mental health issues that have been on the rise over the last year and a half.

When the three COVID-19 vaccines were approved in the U.S. (a Pfizer vaccine to prevent COVID-19 for people 12 years of age and older as well as Johnson & Johnson and Moderna for people age 18), an end to this pandemic was in sight. Some fully vaccinated people chose to ditch the mask altogether. Some individuals began gathering with family and friends once again and venturing back out to their favorite bar or restaurant. COVID-19 cases were on a decline, a sense of “normalcy” was returning, and people all across the country took a big sigh of relief.

Now, with COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations on the rise once again, the delta variant highly prevalent, and only about half of Americans fully vaccinated, people are rethinking their social calendars and heading back inside to the safety of their homes.

Marybeth Evans, a licensed clinical social worker at OSF HealthCare Little Company of Mary Medical Center in Evergreen Park, Illinois discusses the anxiety many are feeling during this time and how to cope with it. She also says keeping some form of socialization intact is crucial for one’s mental health – whether it be in a small group in person or resorting back to virtual gatherings.

“I think some people have become used to being isolated, and now have developed a bit of fear of going out. In that case, I would say that being outside and being with friends and family – if that’s what you were used to before COVID – is a good remedy for getting back into life and lifting your mood. For different people it will mean different things,” Evans says.

Some people are regressing back to early pandemic days where they do not leave their homes except for essential errands. Even those who are vaccinated may choose to take this route due to the rise in COVID-19 cases – including vaccine [breakthrough cases](#). Others feel comfortable getting back into hosting and attending events and gatherings, especially in groups where the majority of attendees are vaccinated.

The internal dilemma of whether or not to attend an in-person event, in combination of the peer pressure to do one thing or the other, is adding to the anxiety many people are feeling. Evans encourages people to be patient with their loved ones and to not guilt or pressure them to do or not do something, especially when it comes to larger events such as parties, weddings, and other gatherings where there will be bigger groups of people.

“I think the person who is giving the event has to be aware that some people may not be comfortable coming – and accept that not in a hurtful way, but just realizing that the world has changed, at least for now. And the person who is invited needs to figure out what will make them comfortable,” explains Evans. “I think we just have to be patient

with our family members about what they think is comfortable. That is something I would encourage for anybody. Just try not to be judgmental about what other people think or do. Try to be friendly and open to differences.

Ultimately, Evans says that each person will approach each situation or event their own way and encourages others to accept and respect one another's actions and decisions during this time. This also includes the decision to keep wearing a mask although fully vaccinated. Some people are choosing to err on the side of caution, and that is to be expected. The external influences and "peer pressure" can be detrimental to one's mental health – even more so when someone is already experiencing anxiety from the pandemic.

"We can't let this whole event divide us. It has in many ways, and I think to get back to a healthy society we have to get back to healthy respect for one another," Evans says.

So how can you cope with the anxiety you may be experiencing?

"Keep up with your spiritual life, your friends. Dealing with anxiety is something that really requires other people. Change your thoughts. Distract yourself. Use meditation. Develop some stress-free moments in your day. I think that everybody should practice some kind of self-care," advises Evans.

If you or a loved one is experiencing mental health struggles caused by the pandemic, OSF HealthCare offers free [behavioral health navigation services](#) to help understand all resources available in your area. [OSF Silver Cloud](#) is also available. The free mental health digital support tool is available in communities served by OSF.