

## **Breaking Isolation: Self Care for When Coronavirus Quarantine Ends**

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The initial period of enforced solitude during the COVID-19 lockdown required both physical and psychological adjustment as our freedom of movement was curtailed and most interpersonal interactions were cut off. Many people were concerned about their mental health and capacity for sustained self-isolation. I have watched and listened to friends, family and colleagues as they have ridden the “corona-coaster” of emotions and moved through stages of adjustment, from desperation for social connection to the comfort of seclusion. Eventually, solitude became their new baseline.

My understanding of the need to be mindful of the process of reengaging socially after extended periods of solitude comes from research as well as personal experiences of having engaged in silent retreats going weeks without speaking or making eye contact and from having lived overseas for months on end. There are joys of returning to familiar comforts, sounds, and interpersonal interactions. Re-connecting with others can feel energizing but also be exhausting.

Periods of prolonged solitude can be challenging, but they can also enable us to turn inward and become reacquainted with ourselves on deeper levels. Connecting with ourselves and spending time with our own thoughts can be a blessing or feel like a curse depending on the tone of our internal dialogue and the resources we have for managing the thoughts, sensations, and emotions that arise. [Observing your thoughts, sensations and emotions like waves is a technique often taught in mindfulness-based practices.](#) Using this technique, people are encouraged not to deny or fight against what is happening or arising but rather to observe what is occurring and to ride the ups and downs like waves which provides some objectivity and separation from the experiences.

### **Returning to a New “Normal”**

There are plenty of social media posts from people anticipating the joys of returning to “normal” after quarantine ends, states reopen, and people are able to return to restaurants, shops, and repopulate our public spaces. There will certainly be connections to rekindle and celebrations to be had, but it is also important to understand that not everyone will be ready to fully re-engage with society and this will require us to be compassionate and patient with ourselves and others as we begin to socialize again. Just as the world has changed during this period of quarantining, so have we as individuals.

### **Compassion for Self and Others**

Everyone will be negotiating a new type of normal and needing compassion while readjusting. Compassion is more than kindness - it also includes a recognition that there is a common humanity, and this is particularly true at the present moment, as we are all experiencing restrictions, fears, and uncertainty. Compassion is also positively associated with mental health and it's good for our own well-being.<sup>1,2</sup> To understand the connection and commonality we have with one another, we need look no further than the shared risks of spreading the coronavirus and the need for universal precautions to protect ourselves and others.

### **Rebuilding Tolerance for Interpersonal Experiences**

There are guidelines for self-isolation and progressive steps for socially re-engaging that are used by people who participate in prolonged silent retreats, and these can also be helpful for reemerging into society. During silent retreats participants are instructed not to make eye contact with others and not to talk to one another because it takes mental and physical energy to do so. Socially interacting with others also keeps us from being present with and connected to our own feelings. When people re-emerge from silent retreats, they are given a period of time to

be physically together with other people but with the option for making eye contact and talking. You may find it helpful to monitor your interactions with others and to remember you can choose how and when to make eye contact. For many of us, eye contact has been minimal during self-isolation, and re-engaging with people face-to-face can feel intense - it may feel pleasantly intense, or it may feel unpleasant or aversive. Whatever your response, it is yours to have, and it is okay. Understand that you may need to titrate the amount of interpersonal direct contact you have and increase your tolerance to interpersonal interaction over time. When socially re-engaging, start small, and give yourself permission to retreat as needed.

### **The Face we Present to the World has Changed**

The lack of face-to-face interaction has allowed us to jettison efforts related to our external appearances and lay bare who we really are with ourselves and with others. We have options for how we return to the world - both social and physically (facial hair has made a major comeback, and who needs lipstick when we are all wearing face masks?). Many of us had the opportunity to let go of outward appearances and the expectations and effort of presenting ourselves to society in the image we believed was expected of us. Perhaps this is an opportunity to give yourself permission to let go of old habits and change how you present yourself to the world.

### **Recommendations**

The key is to *allow* yourself to feel whatever you are feeling at any given time, *observe* how you are responding to social interactions, *accept* what you are feeling, and permit yourself (and others) the time needed to slowly re-engage. What starts off as excitement to socialize can easily turn into exhaustion when people feel overwhelmed by physical interactions. [It can also be helpful to develop a wellness plan for yourself](#) and to monitor how you are responding to social re-engagement. If you are feeling stressed by your interactions, you can make adjustments to the time you spend engaging with people and try to schedule time to go for a walk, run, or do some yoga - chair yoga is a good option for people who are working and people with limited mobility.

In summary, give yourself the time and space you need to adjust to being with people again and try to recognize that you may feel different hour to hour and day to day. Everyone is dealing with a loss of control and uncertainty about what the future brings. This uncertainty and fear can result in challenging behavior. Although we may not be able to control what others do, we can do our best to take care of our own wellbeing in the present moment.

### **References**

1. Bergen-Cico, D, & Cheon, S. (2014) The mediating effects of mindfulness and self-compassion on trait anxiety. *Mindfulness*. 5(5), 505-519. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-013-0205-y>
2. Bergen-Cico, D, Possemato, K, & Pigeon, W, (2014) Reductions in cortisol associated with a primary care mindfulness-based intervention for veterans with PTSD. *Medical Care*, 52: S25-S31

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