

COMING OUT OF LOCKDOWN: STRATEGIES FOR PARENT-CARERS



Reaching Families

Introduction

Dealing with the coronavirus pandemic has been a very real and added strain for most parent carers and their families. The upheaval and disruption to day-to-day routines meant new and added pressures for parent carers juggling their family's needs. It has been hard to adapt and manage family life - and it may be tricky to re-adjust and re-connect with a 'new normal' as the lockdown eases.

Most families have been living with increased isolation and reduced support. Plus, managing extra worries about your family's safety, getting ill, unease about the future, when and if things will get better and maybe even bereavement and loss. It is a lot to recover from and many people are nervous about coming out of lockdown.

Researchers are only just starting to understand the lingering impact of the virus and the experience of being forced into lockdown on each of us. For example, some people are reporting increased anxieties, fear and avoidance of situations like leaving the home, loss of concentration, compulsive behaviours like constantly checking social media for news, disturbed sleep, low moods, unusual weariness.

Of course, the easing of lockdown will bring opportunities for families to resume real life contact with family and friends, get out and about, and return to work, school or college, but the prospect of coming out of lockdown can also be daunting.

- What will life be like after lockdown?
- How do we get back to some sort of normality?
- How do we socialise again?
- Will we be safe?
- Will others still do all the things needed to reduce the risk of spreading the virus?

These worries are normal, but if they start to take over and interfere negatively with our everyday lives or turn into 'post lockdown anxiety', it is worth putting a few things in place to help. Here are six key ideas that summarise some practical ways of looking after ourselves and our families as we venture back into a busy world.

Six ideas for re-connecting with a busy world

1. Go at your own pace

Be kind to yourself, take one small step at a time, ease back into new situations gradually. Lots of people feel worried about coming out of lockdown, so you are not alone.

Try not to pressure yourself to feel better about the change straight away as it can take time to process and get your head around all that life post lockdown might involve. Just as it took time to find ways to cope in lockdown, it might take time to reconnect post lockdown, as things will not be the same as before.



COMING OUT OF LOCKDOWN

Keeping safe can help us and our children to have some control over our lives, so get to know the post lockdown rules and what should be in place. Some children have been highly anxious about coronavirus, so it can be worth limiting your information intake, as not everything is accurate and lots of reports can leave us feeling even more worried. If you want to stay updated, consider limiting how much time you spend listening to or reading the news, set a specific time to do this and stick to it. It always helps to use a credible news source you can trust, because it fact checks the information before publishing or broadcasting.

2. Share your feelings

Notice, talk about and share your worries with other adults. Doing so can help them too. Giving voice to your concerns can normalise what you are feeling, often take the 'sting' out of things. But you also want to be sure not to talk about it too much. In the same way that you encourage your children to talk with you about their worries, you want to keep the conversation to an agreed amount of time or frequency, so that you limit the negative effects of over emphasising the issue, and it gives you dedicated time to problem solve.

3. Set a few goals

Setting goals that are realistic can give you a focus when change feels overwhelming. For example, agree just a few things you want to get sorted now that the children are at school, or introduce a schedule for you to rest, or do something you enjoy once a week, or decide one person you will meet up with. Having a few goals will help creating a new structure that can help to manage feeling overwhelmed. Routine and structure help us and our children to not feel too worried.

While coming out of lockdown will mean new routines are needed, you might have found an activity that your family enjoyed while in lockdown, that you could timetable and continue doing post lockdown. Allow yourself time to adjust. Thinking through what a typical week in post lockdown might be like, what will be different, and how you might manage the changes, can prepare us.

4. Choose what you want to do socially

Think about what you do and do not want to do socially. While the vaccine is being rolled out, we still need to follow the guidance on social distancing to reduce the risk of spreading the virus. If you have been at home for a long time, it might feel odd to go outside, you might have lost a little confidence and independence, or perhaps you have enjoyed seeing fewer people and feel wary about too much socialising again.

It is not helpful to avoid social situations completely and we all need to feel connected, but it is okay to say no to those things you do not feel ready for or may not enjoy anyway. Dealing with each situation one at a time can help and you can choose your pace. Take a look at these suggestions:

- Going shopping. Find a shop where you feel more comfortable or a supermarket that seems best prepared - it might have wider aisles, less people, sanitised trolleys and go at quieter times.
- Seeing friends and family. Meet up with one or two friends to begin with instead of a group, limit a meet up to once a week, acknowledge any awkwardness as it is likely to help others too, avoid crowded places, use the chance to have a mental clear out of negative people in your network.



COMING OUT OF LOCKDOWN

- Going to cafes, pubs, restaurants. Sit outside rather than inside, go at quieter times, try just a short time in a café or pub, remind yourself of what to look forward to.
- Travelling on public transport. Plan how you will get there, carry hand sanitiser, find out if you could car share as an alternative.
- Returning to work. Get information about the procedures and what changes are in place, the system for face-to-face meetings and social distancing, what is reasonable to expect such as masks and sanitiser. Find out if you can continue to work from home part-time, take the chance to review your own boundaries about extra working hours or safety precautions.

5. Look for solutions

Even though many things throughout the pandemic have been uncertain, focusing on what we can control as we reconnect with the world can help. You could write a list - 'What I can and cannot control?' - to help stay with what is possible now. Concentrating on solutions rather than problems can help prevent our worries taking over. When we first went into lockdown, we had to adapt, create new routines, and change our lives with very little preparation - we have this experience to draw on to help us re-adjust. Notice what you have achieved. However, if you are struggling with anxiety consider these suggestions:

- Try doing activities that help prompt the opposite feelings of worry, to help you feel calmer. Identify what you do in your life that makes you feel calm, and call it to mind, or do it.
- Use breathing exercises because they lower stress by sending a message to your brain to relax.
- Start a 'calm box' for yourself (your children might like to do this too). Use your five senses to 'anchor' yourself and push the anxious feelings away. Include something you like to smell, see, touch, taste and hear.
- Look for small positives in your day-to-day life to help you feel better about lockdown easing. For example, it could be something like 'the relief of dropping the children off at school', or 'stopping to have a coffee at a café', or 'taking time to visit a place you have missed'.
- Take each day as it comes. Do the best you can, with what you have. As parent carers, we can often notice what we have not managed to do. Get into the habit of when you go to bed at night, take a few minutes to list 3 things that you did well today.

6. Prioritise taking care of yourself

Looking after your body and your physical health can reduce stress and anxiety as well as improve your mood. Regular exercise, enough sleep and eating healthy meals makes us feel better - but they rely on us prioritising them in our busy weeks.

Staying calm and managing our stress levels can be hard to achieve but should not be underestimated for good health. Using meditation, mindfulness, breathing exercises, pursuing hobbies that take all your attention, being in nature, reading, listening to relaxing podcasts or music, are just a few tried and tested examples of ways you can promote good health.



COMING OUT OF LOCKDOWN

Helpful resources and useful links

- **Reaching Families** - information, training and support for parent-carers across West Sussex: www.reachingfamilies.org.uk
- **Reaching Families Counselling** - 1-2-1 subsidised telephone counselling for parent-carers in West Sussex struggling with emotional wellbeing as a result of the pandemic: www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/stayconnected.html
- **Reaching Families Fact Sheets** - for parents managing the coronavirus such as:
www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/images/factsheets/covid/RF-Covid-Fact-Sheet-Anxiety.pdf
www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/images/factsheets/covid/RF-Covid-Fact-Sheet-LockdownTips.pdf
www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/images/factsheets/covid/RF-Covid-Fact-Sheet-ReturningToSchool.pdf
- **Anxiety UK** - National Support Organisation:
www.anxietyuk.org.uk/coronanxiety-support-resources
- **Coronavirus** - information for people with learning disabilities:
<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLFvgWWNqce45o8XjfHNcVJCjjMfU8u->
- **Council for Disabled Children** - Extensive list of resources and guidance about coronavirus: <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/help-resources/resources/covid-19-support-and-guidance>
- **Council for Disabled Children** - guidance and advice re accessing services through the pandemic: <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/help-resources/resources/family-support>
- **Disabled Children's Partnership** - Information, support, advocacy for children and young people with a disability, families and carers:
<https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/coronavirus>
- **GOV UK - (COVID-19)** Coronavirus restrictions - what you can and cannot do:
www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do
- **GOV UK - (COVID-19)** Working safely during coronavirus:
www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19
- **Mind** - National Support Organisation:
www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/managing-feelings-about-lockdown-easing
- **NSPCC** - National organisation:
www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/coronavirus-supporting-children-special-educational-needs-disabilities

