

Overcoming 'Cave Syndrome'

The anxiety many of us feel as we break isolation and try to rejoin the world has been given a name: "Cave Syndrome." While not a medical term, Cave Syndrome is a good description of our fear and unease about leaving our homes as the pandemic, hopefully, winds down.

For many of us, isolation has led to some long-term psychological effects, including stress, anxiety, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Another factor is that, for many, the fear of getting COVID still outweighs the benefits of returning to a more normal life. They feel safe at home and would rather remain isolated than run the risk of getting sick and dying.

If you're feeling symptoms of Cave Syndrome but want to resume social and work activities, keep the following guidance in mind:

Take it slow. Rank activities from easiest to hardest based on your comfort level. For instance, a walk around the neighborhood would be ranked as easy while going to an amusement park would be hard. Start with the easiest activities and work your way up as your comfort increases.

Ignore peer pressure. Your limits will be different from the limits of friends and family. Give yourself permission to decline invitations for activities that put you out of your current comfort zone.

Find alternatives. Want to eat out again but are afraid of crowded restaurants? Choose a place with outside seating and a time before or after the normal lunch and dinner rush, when crowds are smaller.

Be informed and objective about risks. Our risk acceptance has shrunk as our fear has grown. The best way to sort reasonable caution from unreasonable fears is to educate yourself. Use objective resources, such as your physician, instead of opinion-based media to sort fact from fiction.

Get help. The past months have been long and difficult. Over that time, we likely have developed some unhealthy coping habits while forgetting our normal, healthy ones. If you're feeling overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, talk to your doctor or contact your Employee Assistance Program for help.

Here when you need us.

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