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Student Wellness

How to Manage Return to School Stress and Anxiety

It's no secret that college can be anxiety-provoking. Let's face it, education in any form is pretty stressful, especially when you're being graded on it. These challenging times add another dimension of stress and anxiety. The good news is there are many ways to keep yourself on track when handling the stress and anxiety of returning to school amidst COVID. The most important thing is to make sure that you don't let your mental health and self-care slide. Keep reading for some tips on coping with student stress and anxiety.

1. Remember that feelings about returning vary.

Many aspects of re-entry will be perceived differently from person to person. While some will draw comfort from the increased social contact, others may experience heightened anxiety or dread when returning to social situations. As more public places welcome students back, some will feel relieved to regain a dedicated place to learn, while others may have difficulty leaving their remote-learning lifestyle behind. Be mindful that what feels to you like an encouraging step forward might have the opposite effect on someone else.

2. Plan to renegotiate social norms.

The way we interact will look different than before the lockdown. Personal spaces will look different and get-togethers will be less frequent. To help curb feelings of disappointment, plan ahead. Think about how you can safely socialize with other students, friends, and family, and communicate the plan before you get together. Be prepared to set firm boundaries with people in your life who may be less concerned about the threat and unwilling to follow distancing guidelines.

3. Continue following public health advice.

An important element in readjusting to public life is learning to take appropriate risks. Public health guidelines offer useful parameters to help you feel confident in your decisions and ease back into the world safely. Placing your trust in health authorities can also foster greater peace of mind by validating that you're following the best available advice. Remember that you are not expected to be a public health expert — the professionals will set the limitations. All you have to do is work within them.

4. Monitor your symptoms of stress and anxiety.

In times of change and uncertainty, some degree of stress and anxiety are expected. It's important to regularly monitor your feelings to determine whether you need extra support. There are many free online resources to help with this. However, if you notice a marked shift in your functioning that persists for more than a few days, consider speaking to your doctor or a mental health professional. Venturing back out into the world may feel like a heavy burden, but you don't have to carry it alone.

Mental health apps can be great tools to improve your mental well-being, and the following list are links to free versions for you to download.

For relaxation: Calm
For anxiety: MindShift
For PTSD: PTSD Coach
For deep breathing: BellyBio
For quitting unwanted habits: Quit That!
For stress relief: Take a Break!



6. Recognize that different settings may follow different paths

People naturally compare themselves to others, but different settings may need to follow different paths in the re-entry phase. The college you attend or place you work may set different rules than others do. Some workplaces may permit or even encourage working from home when it was never common before. Some colleges may encourage remote learning and have different requirements for returning to the campus than others. Try to respect these differences and accept that people who are responsible for these decisions are doing the best they can within a climate of dynamic and changing health advice.

7. Use gradual exposure techniques

Exposure is considered the best evidence-based treatment for anxiety. Within public health guidelines, try slowly re-introducing yourself to situations that typically induce some anxiety, rather than confronting them all at once. For example, if you feel anxious about returning to the social atmosphere of your workplace or campus, start by scheduling a friendly catch-up call with one or two other students. Exposure allows you to readjust your assessment of the risk associated with the fear, reducing the anxiety it causes over time.

8. Limit your exposure to news and social media.

Anxiety can build from media exposure, therefore limit your consumption. Schedule times to view updates. Plan to check your news sources or social media feeds just twice a day. Make those checks brief, no more than five minutes each time. That's long enough to scan the latest information. Any longer than that is going to spiral your anxiety. Otherwise, avoid updates that could be feeding your coronavirus anxiety. It is also helpful to limit exposure to social media since a friend's post—which may not even be accurate—can trigger worries, stress or anger for you. Anxiety can be contagious. Reduce the contagion by skipping the updates.

9. Breathe.

Engage in very simple, 5-minute deep breathing sessions at least three times a day. Breathing helps us manage the anxiety response on a physical, physiological and mental level. The physical level is how the body reacts physically. The physiological response centers on the nervous system. And of course, our mental responses relate to how our brain is responding to stress. Breathing deeply has the remarkable power to affect people on all three levels. One minute of deep breathing helps slow down the sympathetic nervous system—the fight or flight response associated with anxiety. Breathing also helps turn on the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps us restore balance and can provide a sense of calm and focus. The parasympathetic nervous system slows the heart rate and increases intestinal and glandular activities. It's sometimes called the "rest and digest" system. Schedule three sessions a day of slow, deep, deliberate breathing for about three to five minutes during each session. Unless you are using your phone to help you breathe deeply, be sure to set it aside during your relaxation sessions.

10. Enjoy the outdoors and get exercise.

New Mexicans are lucky that we live in a sunny climate where getting outdoors is easy and quickly can lead us to beautiful places. Take time to go for a walk or a run. Or find a view of some trees or mountains and enjoy a session of deep breathing outdoors. Even modest physical activity, like walking 20 minutes a day is a great escape from stress and anxiety. Make time to engage in activities that soothe your soul and put coronavirus and other stressors out of your mind, at least temporarily.

Resources:

Agora Crisis Center: 1-866-HELP-1-NM (435-7166) - www.agoracares.org
New Mexico Crisis and Access Line: 1-855-NMCRISIS (1-855-662-7474) or 1-855-227-5485 TTY
National Suicide Prevention LifeLine 24 hours: 1-800-273-8255 - <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>
Coronavirus Hotline: 1-855-600-3453 (toll free) and 1-505-827-0006
NewMexicoKids: 1-800-691-9067
<http://www.newmexicokids.org/coronavirus/>