

Opening Up about our Mental Health as Ontario Opens Up June 11, 2021

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Cover image created by [teravector](#).

Ontario is slowly opening back up! Click [here](#) to read a full list of what we can do now that we're in Step One. For most people, the highlights of this change are being able to relax on restaurant patios and have outdoor gatherings of up to 10 people.

Many of us haven't seen our loved ones since the second wave started in September, and we may have lost touch with our usual social circles as a result.* Many are eager to fill their social calendars with plans to see friends and family outside, which is more than fair after multiple lockdowns, shutdowns, and a 2-month stay-at-home order.

However, not everyone feels ready to reunite with their friends and families after such a stressful 14 months. A survey of more than 1,600 Canadians found that 52% of its participants felt some level of anxiety about the end of "the new normal" and return to "the old normal".* Canadians between the ages of 18 and 24 had the highest rates of distress, with 68% of participants in this age group reporting that they feel some anxiety about a return to pre-pandemic life.*

If you're dreading seeing people in person again, you're not alone. When it comes to declining social calls as the province opens up, it could help to open up to your loved ones about your comfort level and mental health.

"Why do I feel this way?" Professional opinions from mental health practitioners

At this stage of the pandemic, many people are struggling with feeling low and numb, and some people may be confused about why returning to "normal" does not immediately fix their mood.* Psychotherapist Sarah Ahmed is concerned about the general public's mental health as things reopen.* She wants to remind everyone to have reasonable expectations: "We're not trying to thrive over here, nothing about what we're in right now is normal, ... we're just trying to survive."*

Just because feeling overwhelmed and anxious is common, it doesn't mean it's normal or okay to dismiss and bury these feelings. "Once the restrictions have lifted and it's gone weeks or months and you're still inside and you're still very frightened, that might be an indication that you might need some help, particularly if the anxiety is interfering with your life," says Steven Taylor, clinical psychologist at the University of British Columbia.*

“The pandemic is having a greater impact on people who have these pre-existing [mental health] conditions. And then in some people it’s creating new conditions, like post traumatic stress disorder, particularly in frontline workers,” explains Gordon Asmundson, who is a clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at the University of Regina.*

Asmundson adds that a downside of the ongoing lockdowns and stay-at-home orders is that “people with anxiety and panic disorders have been able to stay home and avoid the things that might cause them anxiety, which could actually worsen things.”*

“Avoidance is one of the key fuels to the fire of anxiety and stress,” he said. “It’s a really effective coping strategy in the short term, you avoid what stresses you out, you feel better, but in the long term the avoidance comes at a cost and you start missing out on opportunities to learn that you often overestimate the amount of threat that’s out there.”*

“Is it worth it to reconnect?” It’s okay to walk away

Physical distance hasn’t been the only thing that’s been separating friends and families. Many people have been spending more time on social media to try to satisfy their need to socialize, and the increased amount of time that we’re spending on social media has made us aware of our loved ones’ opinions on a number of social issues, including: following public health measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, race relations, reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, domestic terrorism, and opinions on foreign affairs.*

In addition to the anxiety you may be feeling about things reopening, “what we’re seeing on the news, media headlines about what’s going on in Palestine, the COVID crisis in India, further makes you feel very stuck, very helpless, very numb as well, and it’s very distressing to the body also,” says Ahmed.*

An article by CTV News includes anecdotes from Canadians about how social media has affected some of their relationships. Jennifer Scott, age 43, deleted her Facebook account because of interactions over race relations and the pandemic.* She shared that, for some of her friendships, “It’s the loving thing, the good thing by not having them in your inner circle. Be polite, say hi, but I can definitely think of a handful of people I might not be going out of my way to talk to again because the space that the pandemic created allowed for so much to surface.”*

She added, “Even if you take all the political stuff out of it, how many people discovered they didn’t miss that person the way they thought they would, or it wasn’t a difference of opinions, you’re just not feeling it anymore, or maybe the friendship wasn’t that close to begin with?”* Scott’s experience resembles that of many Canadians who are deciding whether to rekindle strained friendships now that we are able to meet up offline.

Online interactions with family members have also complicated family dynamics. The way that family members have spoken to each other during conversations about current events has

led some people to reevaluate if those relationships are worth returning to.* In that same article by CTV News, 33-year-old Hilary Dare elaborated on her decision not to reconnect. During discussions about potentially divisive issues, she felt that her family wasn't willing to listen to her.* Dare commented, "With the family thing, there's a lot of pain there. Some of them don't like me and I don't think I should go into spaces where I'm not liked or where my voice isn't wanted ... so I'm saying no to the family situation."*

According to clinical psychologist Danielle Harris, now may be the perfect time to consider and assess the relationships in your life.* You may have outgrown some people, and your boundaries and preferences may have also changed since the last time that you saw them.*

"How do I start the conversation with someone I haven't spoken to in months?"

Sometimes people fall out of touch without any deep, underlying reason. It's been a difficult year for most people, and some of your loved ones may have not reached out to you because they've been in survival mode.

Harris advises starting the conversation by saying something like, "I hope you can understand it's been a really tough year and I've neglected some friendships that really matter to me."* To keep the conversation going, Harris suggests some sample questions like: What are you looking forward to doing this summer? What was the best thing to happen to you this year? What has been the biggest change for you since the pandemic?*

The first few conversations may be a little awkward at first, but reconnecting could have a very positive impact on your mood.*

If you are interested in more tips like this one, Harris has created a [free online mini communication course](#) with other suggestions on how to "express yourself in relationships, to build new connections and maintain current ones."* This guide was created with young people in mind*, which is significant considering that Canadians between the ages of 18 and 24 were the group that reported the highest rates of anxiety in the mental health survey that was mentioned at the beginning of this article. However, Harris assures that many of her techniques for improving relationships are relevant for people of all ages.*

"What can I do to manage my anxiety?"

Like this mini communication course, there are a number of free online resources to help with the adjustment to the province reopening. Clinical psychologist and psychology professor Gordon Admunson recommends [Mind Shift](#), which is offered through Anxiety Canada.* "It's an evidence-based online app that people can actually log into and it's like your own personal therapist on the phone, except it's not a person, it's a program," Asmundson explained.*

Even if you have barriers to accessing online resources, there are still things you can do to manage your anxiety. Psychotherapist Sarah Ahmed suggests: "Speak to your friends, share experiences, educate yourself, go and read some information from credible sources. Check in

with yourself — what that looks like is a mood rating scale, so [on] a scale of zero to ten, how are you feeling today?”*

She also suggested trying to find terms to describe your feelings, and naming the emotions that you’re struggling with: “It actually helps regulate the emotions, or the intensity of the emotions, when you put a name to it.”*

If you are ever experiencing a mental health crisis, the Canadian Mental Health Association recommends that you:

- Contact your doctor*
- Go to the nearest hospital*
- Find resources at [ConnexOntario](#)*
- Call 911 or Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000*
- Call a crisis line*

There are a number of crisis lines across Ontario. Click [here](#) and [here](#) to search for resources in your area. Click [here](#) for the Canada Suicide Prevention Service. If you feel overwhelmed by the number of resources, call [ConnexOntario](#) and they can help you navigate the system and provide information about counselling services and support services in your community.

To sum up, if you are feeling anxious about meeting up in person, don’t force yourself or overcommit to meeting with too many people.* There is no “normal way” to socialize, so don’t feel embarrassed about easing into it at your own pace. Just because you are allowed to meet outdoors as of today, it doesn’t mean that something is wrong with you if you would rather stay home. You might be waiting for your second dose, and that’s valid. Lastly, I think it’s more helpful to think of this stage of the pandemic as more like a “new, new normal” than a return to the “old normal”. Also, at the end of the day, remember that normal is relative.

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If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at www.ontario.ca/coronavirus. Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675