

Taking our time to get back to normality

by Rachel Kelly

Dispatches from the happiness frontline



The French call it *syndrome de l'escargot* (“syndrome of the snail”) while the Spanish prefer *síndrome de la cabaña* (“syndrome of the cabin”). We English favour the less poetic “re-entry syndrome”, or “reverse culture shock”. Whatever we call it, the feeling of anxiety as we emerge from our shells or cabins to re-enter the post-Covid world is real.

At first this concern might seem counterintuitive. Surely we should be celebrating the easing of lockdown, being reunited with friends and – for those of us lucky enough to still have one – returning to our office and job? Isn't the danger over, and this is a time for us to dismantle our carefully constructed defences?

Yet it turns out that this exact moment can be one of heightened anxiety.

The concept of “reverse culture shock” dates to the early 1960s. Two US psychologists, John and Jeanne Gullahorn, observed that after extended periods of travel, those returning home experienced downs as well as ups, readjusting to what was once familiar. Explorers returning from the Antarctic were a case in point. This readjustment is understandably more challenging for those who have experienced some kind of trauma while away – soldiers returning to civvy street from a war zone, aid workers returning home, or anyone coming out of prison.

Until now, psychological distress about this kind of readjustment has affected relatively few of us; now it is something with which we are all grappling. We may not have traversed the polar wastes or tended to the wounded, but we have all travelled to a different country these past few months. And now many of us are experiencing re-entry anxiety.

It comes in two distinct types. First, some of us are anxious because we have a lurking worry of catching or spreading Covid-19. This is especially true of those with a fear of germs, or OCD. Second, some of us are fearful because we are out of practice at socialising. We may not even be sure who our friends are any more. We can find it difficult to reconnect. This is particularly true for those with social anxiety.

One answer to these feelings is “exposure therapy”, the gold-standard treatment for many anxiety disorders. This means confronting sources of fear safely, so in our new normal that means being masked, socially distanced and acting sensibly. The key is to gradually expose yourself to more challenges little by little.

The alternative to exposure is avoidance. When we avoid what we fear we can feel temporary relief. The problem is that we feel the anxiety more keenly the next time we confront what worries us. So venture out we must. But like snails, we are allowed to take our time.

Rachel Kelly is a writer and mental health campaigner.