

Managing the transition out of lockdown

COVID19 and the stay-at-home orders has been a challenging time for many individuals and families. As much as we may be looking forward to new freedoms with restrictions easing, we also recognise that it will bring a new set of stresses that we each need to manage in order to do this transition well.

Some the emotions and responses that may be experienced as restrictions ease are:

- Relief that restrictions are lifting and that normal routines can return
- Excitement about catching up with others
- Worry about continued infection and transmission
- Anxiety about checking in with family and friends about their vaccination status and what is therefore allowed
- Feeling unsettled and uneasy about so many changes
- Anxiety about returning to school face-to-face
- Anxiety about re-connecting with friends after so long
- Uncertainty about what will be allowed and possible eg. Will exams go ahead? Can we book a trip to see relatives at Christmas?
- Worry about plans changing again and having further disappointments
- Not feeling like there is energy to go back to pre-lockdown routine
- Pressure to make plans and "get out"

It is likely that you and those that you love will feel many of these emotions and reactions, even at the same time. For some, these feelings may be strong and may even feel overwhelming at times.

As individuals and as a family or household, talking and planning for the easing of restrictions and the subsequent emotions, will be really important.

Talk

Set aside some time to speak as a family about how everyone is feeling with restrictions lifting. Discuss what life might look, what aspects of post-lockdown life each person is looking forward to, and what aspects of post-lockdown life each person might be feeling worried or unsure about. Acknowledge that there will be many emotions that will be experienced, and that it is normal to experience seemingly conflictual emotions (eg. excitement and worry) at the same time. If you have children, you may also want to speak to them individually about these things in case they feel more comfortable to raise their ideas and concerns in one-to-one conversations. If you live alone, it would be helpful to have this conversation with a friend.

Plan

As part of these discussions put together a plan for what post-lockdown life might look like for you and as a family. Given the length of the stay-at-home orders it is likely to be beneficial to think about how activities and social engagements can be re-introduced in a staged way, and at a pace that is not overwhelming. Making plans will also prevent you or those you love relying on avoidance to manage their anxiety. If your child is very worried about post-lockdown life there may be the temptation to allow your child not to return to face-to-face school for the remainder of the school year, or to not make any social arrangements at all. While this might feel like it solves

the problem and protects your child, unfortunately the benefit is very short-lived and it can make it harder for your child to face their anxieties into the future. This dynamic is also true for adults. Getting the balance and pace of returning to normal life is important and planning rather than relying on reactive responses will be a big part of getting the balance right.

Support

Each person in your family or household will be experiencing a range of emotions and there is likely to be an undercurrent of stress and tiredness as you all navigate a constantly changing situation. It is therefore important to be a support as well as activating external supports for yourself. Some of the ways that support can be provided for children as well as adults in the transition out of lockdown include:

- Listening and validating
- Understanding the context of reactions and responses
- Spending time with them
- Routine and consistency
- Planning ways to re-engage in normal life
- Advocating for external supports
- Being kind to yourself

Some tips for supporting children:

Listening and validating

Your child will be experiencing a lot of change and a lot of emotions at present. Listening to them about their concerns is an important way that you can support them. While it can be tempting to focus on being positive and problem solving, these strategies can sometimes leave others feeling unheard or misunderstood. In the first instance, validate. To validate means to acknowledge what your child is saying, to really listen, and to recognize the difficulty and the emotion rather than moving into problem-solving mode. If you want to learn more about validation, check out: <https://www.emotionfocusedfamilytherapy.org/resources/>

Understanding the context of your child's reactions and responses

Emotions can have a big impact on how your child reacts and responds. When someone feels overwhelmed, they are more likely to be irritable and angry, withdrawn, and less engaged in family life and activities. When you see your child responding or behaving in a difficult way, think to yourself "What might be going on for my child below the surface?" "What feelings might be driving what I am seeing?" Understanding the emotion that is driving the behaviour will not only make it easier to respond in a compassionate way, but it will also give you some clues about what

they might need from you in terms of support.

Spending time with your child

While an adolescent is unlikely to admit it, teenagers need their parents and actually want to spend time with you deep down. Due to lockdown, you've probably spent a lot of time with your child and so as lockdown lifts it will be important to think of ways that you can continue to spend time with your child and connect with them even as life outside of home is likely to get much busier.

Routine and consistency

With change and uncertainty comes worry and feeling unsettled. You can create some stability and certainty for your child and family by maintaining a routine and being consistent in the way that you approach interactions and situations. Also, having experienced less activities during lockdown, it may be that you reassess the number of commitments that you resume. If you do re-prioritise, be sure to encourage that which will foster spiritual growth. Childhood and adolescence is a key time in becoming a disciple of Jesus.

Tips for transitioning out of lockdown for any who feel anxious or worried:

Plan ways to re-engage in normal life

As discussed above, planning will be an essential part of managing this transition out of lockdown, especially if you or those you love are experiencing anxiety or stress. If coming to a church service feels too daunting, plan some smaller steps to get used to regathering with others. You might gather with some church friends in a park or in your home. You might invite others to join you to watch church online. As a next step, you might come to a Sunday gathering but plan to sit near an open door or to leave quickly.

Advocate external supports

Transitioning back into life after lockdown holds many changes and potential challenges. If you are finding it difficult, be proactive in speaking with those who may help. It could be a friend, a pastor, a counsellor, your child's school, and any other support people about how they can work with you to help facilitate the transition.

Be kind to yourself

The last eighteen months has been a very difficult time and most of us have not ever had to experience a world-wide pandemic before. You have been running a care-giving marathon while experiencing your own emotions and stressors. It's ok to be tired. It's ok to ask for others to support you. It's ok not to have all the answers. Keeping communication open and taking the time to reflect on the transition out of lockdown will allow you to navigate all of these changes in the best way possible.