

June Newsletter 2021



Taking Baby Steps Back Into The World

We haven't returned to normal yet, but it feels like things are starting to shift. "To mask up or not to mask up?" This seems to be what we ask ourselves as we finally start to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Going back to "normal" after COVID-19 is going to be a challenge for many of us. Below we discuss some important topics and common questions some of us may have when it comes to reopening the world.

What is Agoraphobia?

Agoraphobia is a phobia or fear of open and crowded places, leaving one's home, or being in places where one may feel trapped or stuck. Typically, agoraphobia develops when one has a panic attack, or series of panic attacks, in a highly populated public setting. Often, the person feels threatened by the crowd of people and he/she begins to feel worried, trapped, helpless, or embarrassed. If one has severe agoraphobia, he/she may attempt to avoid all public interactions and never leave his or her home.

How COVID played a role in "increasing" agoraphobia

It is no surprise that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the public to be more conscious of highly crowded public areas, especially after a lockdown, which completely shut down the world for months. Therefore, it doesn't come as a surprise to know some people are afraid to re-enter the public world. When places like stores, malls, and sporting events were closed or shut down for so long, people began to get used to the at-home life. Some even coped with the lockdown by telling themselves that "out there was unsafe." These associations may have been more dangerous than a temporary coping mechanism. Now, the world is open and places are becoming less strict about masks (if vaccinated) and more open to the public. While this may have given a new life and meaning to many who felt trapped inside, this may also cause fear and anxiety in many who have developed an intense fear of any situation that could spread the

COVID-19 virus. Therefore, as it appears, there may be an increase in feelings of agoraphobia because of this pandemic.

In addition to increasing feelings of agoraphobia, COVID-19 could have negatively impacted the treatment and progression those with pre-COVID agoraphobia were making. Treatment for this condition often includes systematic desensitization or graded exposure to public places. First, the therapist and client will start small. For example, the therapist may show a picture of a crowded place, and talk through the anxieties this picture causes. Eventually, the client will work his/her way up to entering a crowded public space. Systematic desensitization is an effective treatment approach for many looking to extinguish their agoraphobia.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the feelings of worry people have over public places and social interactions. However, it is important that we distinguish true agoraphobia from COVID-19 anxiety or feelings of agoraphobia because of the virus. Although the world has pushed open its doors, there are some that aren't ready to attend crowded sporting events, shop at popular stores, or eat out during the dinner rush. Feeling wary of crowds, being over-cautious in public, and not feeling completely comfortable outside of the house are all normal reactions to the trauma COVID-19 caused. It is important that during these times we normalize the anxiety surrounding social interactions. However, it is also important that we don't let the COVID-19 anxiety control us. We weren't afraid of the world before COVID and we shouldn't be afraid of it now. With the vaccine more available and/or the knowledge that masks are effective protection, it is time to face our fears and GET BACK OUT THERE BABY!!!!

Wrapping It Up

The pandemic has reshaped a lot of our social routines and daily habits. Because of that many of us may feel resistant to return to pre-pandemic life. Struggling to come back to normal is going to be common, but taking small steps instead of large ones out into society can help combat the anxiety that may come along with returning to our new normal. When in doubt, start small.