

Refresh! Restart! Coming Back to Campus in the Context of COVID



Counselling and
Clinical Services



UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA

Authors: Dr. Jasmine Bajwa, Dr. Erica Dunn, Jason Murray, Shauna Rosiechuk

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Introduction

To successfully adapt and survive the pandemic we've had to reconcile our lives with the realities of COVID-19, keeping ourselves and each other as safe as possible through a whole range of new and difficult ways of living. That's been hard emotional and physical work. Take a pause for a moment, and reflect that you have made it this far. Despite whatever else has happened, you coped and survived, and that's a monumental accomplishment.

As we prepare to return to campus life with more in-person classes and services, it's reasonable to anticipate a wide range of reactions for students, faculty, and staff. Some will experience anxieties and concerns about that transition. For others, the return to campus might be eagerly anticipated, and actually a bit exciting! Many of us will have a mix of both kinds of responses. **We will all respond differently to the return to campus, and that's okay. There is no one right or "normal" response.**

The purpose of this handout is to anticipate some of the most likely challenges that members of the University of Alberta community may have in returning to campus, offer some guidance and support for those potential concerns, and remind folks that the adjustment and adaptation process will take time and require energy regardless of how you feel about returning.

We hope the information in this handout helps you explore and identify the possible challenges you might face (or already are feeling), and plan some helpful responses. In presenting a wide range of potential issues, we are not at all suggesting that everyone will experience all of these! You might focus on only one or two of the topics in this handout. **And we do not want to shame or pathologize how we each experience the adjustment ahead of us, and encourage you to do the same. If you find yourself struggling in any way, know that you are certainly not alone and that your response is likely reasonable given the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic.**

Join us at the corresponding workshop

Please note that the information contained within this handout will be discussed at our series of Refresh! Restart! Coming Back to Campus After COVID workshops. We invite all University of Alberta Community members to attend. More information and registration forms can be found at uab.ca/mhworkshops. Workshops will be held online at the following dates and times:

Monday, August 16, 2021	2:00-3:30 PM
Thursday, August 19, 2021	2:00-3:30 PM
Wednesday, August 25, 2021	4:00-5:30 PM
Thursday, August 26, 2021	2:00-3:30 PM
Thursday, September 2, 2021	2:00-3:30 PM
Tuesday, September 7, 2021	4:00-5:30 PM
Monday, September 13, 2021	2:00-3:30 PM
Thursday, September 23, 2021	3:00-4:30 PM
Monday, September 27, 2021	2:00-3:30 PM
Wednesday, October 6, 2021	3:00-4:30 PM

Anticipation

Returning to campus comes with many unknowns and, as a result, there can be much anticipatory anxiety and excitement. As the return to campus nears or begins, there are ways to work your natural and expected experience of anticipation such that you can be more prepared and respond in a more helpful way.

Anticipate Struggles

Take a minute to stop and ask yourself, “what are my greatest fears or worries about returning to campus, and what do I foresee to be my biggest challenges?” Are you worried about in-person classes? Navigating the U of A campus for the first time? Getting to and from campus? Waking up earlier? Being around larger groups of people? COVID-19 transmission? Having more social interactions than you have now? No matter what you are worried about or what you foresee as challenges, these thoughts are valid - returning back to campus after 18 months away is new for everyone. It’s helpful to reflect on your fears ahead of time, rather than being caught off guard upon your return.

As you consider your fears or expected challenges, consider reasonable responses that you may be able to start implementing ahead of time, ones that slowly and gently move you towards being more comfortable and help you not become less avoidant in response to anxieties. **For example, if you are worried about:**

Navigating the campus for the first time, or returning to the campus after being away for so long:

- Try a walking tour of the campus with a friend prior to the start of the year, or in the earlier morning or evening time when things are slower.
- Download the UAlberta app that has a campus map to help you navigate.
- At the start of the year, come to campus early in order to find your classes and have time to manage any emotions that come up.

Waking-up earlier than normal:

- See our sleep tips in the next section.
- Start to gradually roll back your wake-up time by 15 minutes each day until you find that you are able to wake-up near the time that you will be for your classes.
- During the first couple weeks back, ask a friend, roommate, or family member to help ensure that you wake up.

Being in large groups of people:

- “Practice” by going to gradually more populated areas over a period of time (e.g., go to a smaller boutique store, followed by a larger box store, followed by a busy shopping mall).

COVID-19 transmission:

- Prepare to take the precautions that would make you feel comfortable, such as having travel-sized sanitizer and using face masks. It’s okay to ask others to keep some social distance too.
- If you have not already done so, book your vaccines so that you are fully immunized (two doses) as soon as possible.
- It’s not abnormal to fear a real illness; nobody should be shamed for this!

Getting to and from campus:

- Download the ETS app and plan your route well in advance.
- Find someone to carpool with you.
- If being on the LRT or bus is anxiety provoking, but you need to use public transit, you can use slow and gradual “exposure” to help you cope by using public transit in off peak times and building up to busier times. Also, it’s fine to wear a mask and sanitize afterwards.

Social interactions:

- Allow yourself to be selective to start and only

spend time with the people that you are most comfortable with.

- Shorten the duration of social interactions at the beginning of the return, and gradually build up the length over time as you become a bit more comfortable.
- Limit the quantity of social interactions and gradually increase this over time.
- Build in time for solitude into your schedule.

Remember to practice being realistic

Sometimes we worry about things that are not realistic or probable. To better examine how rationale our fears and worries are, we can ask ourselves the following questions:

- What is the evidence that supports my prediction? What is the evidence against my prediction?
- On a scale of 0% to 100%, how likely is it that my worry will come true?
- What is most likely to happen?

Once we ask ourselves these questions, we can identify a more balanced thought process.

For example:

Worry:

I'm not going to be able to handle all the increased social contact when I go back to campus.

Evidence that supports my worry:

- It has been several months since I have been around large groups of people.

Evidence that negates my worry:

- I enjoyed socializing before COVID-19.
- I generally like my university friends.
- Everyone will be adjusting with me.
- I don't actually know how it is going to go being back on campus.

How likely is it that my worry will come true?: 10%

What is most likely to happen:

It might be hard for me to adjust to the changes at first, but I will get used to it pretty quickly because it's nothing that I haven't experienced before.

Balanced thought:

It might feel overwhelming at first to have so much more socialization in my life. I can handle this by taking time for myself and easing in where possible. Socializing is something that I liked before COVID-19 and it's probable that I will come to enjoy it again in time.

For more information on this method of challenging your thinking, check out [Challenging Worries booklet from the Centre for Clinical Interventions](#).

Look Forward With Excitement

The opportunity to return to campus will allow us to resume activities that we have missed and to approach tasks and connect with others in new ways using the learnings from the last year. **Prior to returning to campus, reflect on, discuss, and/or journal about:**

What is going to be exciting or positive about your return to campus? What are you looking forward to that you have missed?

- These things can be big things (like places, people) or small things (like the Christmas lights in Quad in winter).
- Are there friends, faculty, staff that you haven't seen in a while that you are looking forward to connecting with? Are you excited about studying in the library or SUB? Are you excited to see your colleagues? Are you excited about visiting certain restaurants or facilities on campus? Are you excited to get back to the VVC? Are you excited to take the LRT again? Are you excited to have more access to campus support services?

What good will you gain in your life by returning?

- Will you benefit by having more structure and routine to your days? Will focusing more on personal hygiene be enjoyable? Will increased social contact lift your spirits? Will you spend less time on social media and more time interacting face-to-face? Will you enjoy your house more now that it is a place you come home to rather than a place you stay in all day?

What did you learn from the pandemic that you want to continue doing?

- Do you want to continue "meeting" virtually with people that are geographically distant from you? Do you have new exercise/sleep/diet habits that you want to sustain? Do you want to continue to

prioritize time for yourself? Do you want to spend a certain amount of time with your family? Do you want to spend more time doing introspective behaviours like journaling?

Science also helps us understand why returning to in-person activities may be physiologically and practically beneficial for all of us and further contribute to excitement about the return:

- Being on campus likely means that we will be outside more and move our bodies more throughout the day relative to when we are working exclusively from home. Increased movement and exposure to sunlight are known to help with mood improvement, attentional focus, and anxiety reduction.
- Physical contact with others (e.g., hugging, shaking hands) is known to increase oxytocin, subsequently helping us to feel happier and less stressed. Physical contact can also bolster our immune system and reduce our overall experience of anxiety.
- Accessing communication avenues that provide more non-verbal information (e.g., in person dialogue vs. telephone dialogue) may allow us to have more effective communication with one another.
- Returning to campus may help facilitate the development of more structure and routine in everyday life. Routines can improve coping, reduce stress and anxiety, and offset burnout.

Preparation

The past year has challenged many of our typical routines and daily life activities. In order to adapt and cope with COVID-19, we have had to forgo some of our usual routines, and accept a great deal of constant change and uncertainty in many parts of our lives. For many, the foundational health practices of sleep, eating, physical activity, and recuperation, have become disrupted, uneven, and out of sync. It's an understandable and almost inevitable change, so don't stress out too much if, for you, healthy habits have slid!

Preparing to return means patiently rebuilding and revitalizing many of those former routines. For some, it is a fresh opportunity to build these routines for the first time ever! While nobody wants to live a life that is completely routinized and mechanical, we know that most of our foundational health and wellness practices, and basic life necessities, benefit from some structure and consistency. Yes, building healthy routines requires some dedicated time and effort at the start! The benefit is that when routines are established they take up much less energy, planning, thought, and time, for the same positive outcomes.

Be gentle and patient with yourself when you start. Nobody can change or adapt all these routines at once! Pick those that you feel would be most helpful for you to improve, and allow yourself to slowly add new routines as you feel others become more stable and reliable.

Sleeping

Consistent time to wake up.

The start to a good sleep routine is getting up at the same time every morning. By same time, we mean picking a time and getting up within +/- 20 minutes. Obviously the times you select have to fit within your work and class schedule, but the more closely you can stick to a consistent awake time, the better your sleep can be as you will be more consistently tired around the same time in the evenings.

Consistent time to fall asleep.

Aim for 6.5 to 8 hours of sleep, plus another 20 minutes to actually fall asleep. Given that, knowing your wake-up time suggests when you should plan to turn off your lights and start to fall asleep. The more closely you stick to that time the better of a sleep routine you build, and the more consistently you will "have a good sleep".

Beneficial sleep preparation.

We can't expect to go from busy, stressful, mentally taxing work directly into sleep. We need to set aside time to help signal to our mind and body that we are transitioning from being active into preparing for sleep. Try 30 to 60 minutes of sleep prep time. Engage in activities that are quiet, physically calming, less stressful, emotionally positive, restorative, or even simply distracting from life stressors.

Avoid common issues.

There are a few simple things we can avoid to help us sleep better, such as: not using blue-light devices like phones and laptops at least one hour before bedtime, limit our caffeine intake (avoid it altogether after noon), limit alcohol close to sleep time, avoid naps (though a select minority may nap with no impact to nighttime sleep), and do not use sleep prep time to think about stressful things or worry about falling asleep. If you are a worrier, just take a bit of time before sleep prep to write out your worries and remind yourself you can deal with them later.

You can find more information about sleep hygiene, and many other suggestions for improving your sleep, in the [CCS Sleep handout](#).

Eating

There is evidence to show that some people are eating more food, more often, in response to pandemic stress and other difficult emotions. We sometimes call this “emotional eating”, and likely most of us do it from time to time without harm. The unique pandemic circumstances (high distress, stuck at home, food delivery services, making more food at home) has led some to increase emotional eating to unhelpful amounts. We are not here to make anyone feel guilty about that, but to encourage us all to slowly adjust to healthier eating practices! The goal is to reduce, not remove, “emotional eating”.

The Canada Food Guide, and psychologists who study eating, recommend the following:

Practice eating mindfully.

Instead of taking a few minutes to quickly and thoughtlessly eat, consume some of your snacks or meals slowly and deliberately. Pay close attention to all the sensations of scent, taste, and texture as you smell, and slowly chew your food.

Pause and reflect before eating.

Ask yourself: do I have the urge to eat because I am really hungry, or because I am bored, stressed, worried, or in some other emotional state? Often pausing and reflecting on why we are eating can disrupt or reduce emotional eating.

Create new responses.

Find ways to more often respond and soothe your emotions instead of eating. If, in response to the question, “Why do I feel like eating?” you learn you are eating out of boredom, don’t have a snack but find something interesting to better engage your mind and body. If you are feeling lonely, then reach out to a friend or family member. Or express your feelings by writing them down. The urge to eat will pass.

The suggestions in this section are not meant to identify or treat disordered eating or eating disorders. If you experience either, consult a physician, dietician, and/or psychological treatment professional.

For more specific ideas on what foods to eat, consult a nutritionist and/or review the [Canada Food Guide!](#)

Physical Activity

Physical activity has proven benefits for building psychological and physical wellness, and also for managing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. Some have managed to keep physical exercise as a part of their pandemic lifestyle - if that’s you, way to go! For others, the limitations of access to gyms, the need for quarantining, and the concerns about getting COVID-19, have made regular physical activity much more difficult. It’s understandable!

Here are some starting tips to get physical activity back into your life:

Start with a small and manageable amount.

Don’t create a physical activity plan by setting really high goals and then working to meet them - too often you won’t, and then you’ll feel upset and disappointed. That will hurt your motivation! Instead, start with very manageable and simple goals. First, focus on just the frequency of being active. Pick a shorter time frame, like a week or two, and set an easy goal to start with (1-2 times a week for whatever duration you can manage at the start, even if it’s 15 minutes). Your long term goal, according to Health Canada, is to be active most days of the week.

Choose something you are more likely to enjoy.

We use the term physical activity versus exercise to encourage you to be creative and have the

most latitude to pick activities that get your body moving and that you will enjoy more! The positive reinforcement of enjoying being active will help you maintain regular activity. Anything that gets your body moving and increases your heart rate is a great start, and it doesn't have to be a sport or going to the gym: walking, cycling, a Youtube yoga class, physically active housework or yard work, playing soccer in a park with friends, etc.

Find a group.

People who exercise with a friend, or a group of people (like a sports team) tend to stick with it a little more than those who do it alone. Some ideas might be to form a walking group (lunch, or before/after work), hold some meetings as a "walking meeting", join a campus fitness class or recreational sport team, ask a friend to be a "work-out" buddy, and so on.

Build up frequency, intensity, time, and type.

The simple rule of thumb is to first increase the frequency of your activity. Then try for 30-60 minutes of activity at a time, and then build up your intensity. And as your frequency increases you might find it helpful to have more variety of activity to stave off boredom (and avoid losing motivation).

For more detailed information on physical activity and exercise guidelines, see the guidelines from the [Canadian Society for Exercise Psychology](#), and Health Canada. Also, check out what [University of Alberta Campus Recreation](#) opportunities are available.

Recuperation and Rejuvenation

For many, it will take a lot of energy to re-engage and navigate our way back into a more "in-person" campus life. As a result we can anticipate feeling more tired at the end of a day, or week, of school

than was previously normal. That makes sense, because feeling tired is one sign that we are doing the hard work of coping and adjusting!

Select for enjoyment, meaning, positive energy.

Generally speaking, we feel rejuvenated when we do things that either bring us enjoyment, are meaningful or important to us in some way, and/or contribute positive emotional energy to our lives. It could be a hobby we love, something fun we do with friends or family, or quiet time alone. So what really rejuvenates you? Only you know for sure, but here are some possible ideas include social activities (e.g., getting together with a friend or a group of friends), spiritual practices (e.g., make time for prayer), solitary activities (e.g., reading, listening to music), and restful activities (e.g., watching a movie)

Make a plan.

When we make a plan, we are more likely to take action based on it! So create a little plan for rejuvenation that includes

- A list of possible activities that you know would be restorative.
- Times within the week that you could reserve for recuperation. It might be 15-30 minutes one day, or a whole afternoon on the weekend, or any combination of things.

Attend to your energy.

Pay attention to how you feel at the start and ending of each day. Notice what seems to rejuvenate you more, or less. Moderate your recuperation time based in part on your energy levels. If you find yourself depleted day after day, it's probably a sign that you need a bit more recuperation time.

For more ideas, review the CCS handout on [Balance and Self-Care](#).

Reconnection

Feeling the Return

Throughout the last 18 months, we have been encouraged to stay away from people and remain inside to be safe; as creatures of habit, we have adjusted to this life of isolation, no matter how difficult it may have been. Now we face a new challenge: returning to a social world. With this change comes feelings and worries associated with the idea of “normal” and the experience of being in a more open social environment. However, there are many things we can do to help us navigate these challenges.

Self-Compassion

Getting back into a social world may cause you to feel overwhelmed, even for those who consider themselves extroverts. One reason behind this feeling is that for months we have missed subtle forms of communication that come from interacting in-person. As a result your senses may feel overloaded as you take in all of the sensory input you haven't experienced over the past few months.

- It is important to be gentle with yourself and others as we all adjust to these re-introduced social cues and new sensory input. Not to mention the potential micro-rejections we may experience throughout the day as people become comfortable with their own social boundaries. This may look like people moving further away from you, not wanting to hug or high-five.

Own the Awkwardness

Expect that there will be some discomfort and awkwardness, not just for you, but for everyone around you. Acknowledging the awkward is helpful to reduce tension, and naming it can help take its power away in that moment.

Honour Distress as Normal

No matter how you feel, it's important to recognize that emotional discomfort is a normal human experience. Our ability to experience emotions is what makes us human, and these emotions can be very informative, so it is helpful to be aware of our emotions and use the information to guide us.

Although some emotions can be more uncomfortable to experience (sadness, anger, fear) it is helpful to know that regardless of how distressing the emotion feels, it will not last forever. Emotions exist like waves, they grow and reach a peak, but eventually they subside and pass by. Reminding yourself that this emotion will pass like a wave can make it much easier to tolerate your distress as you experience it. The following strategies can also help you to take action to manage distress in a healthy way.

- **Be aware of triggers:** It is helpful to understand what triggers your heightened emotions. These triggers could be internal, such as worries about your ability to adapt to a social world again and figuring out how to manage your boundaries and safety. Or, your triggers could be external as you face new challenges being on campus or in class. It can also be helpful to recall times in the past where you have experienced distress and what triggered those emotions, so you can prepare for similar situations.
- **Note your warning signs:** Once you are aware of what is triggering your distress you can start paying attention to the warning signs that signal that you are overwhelmed. These warning signs can be feelings, thoughts, bodily reactions or behavioral urges and can be any of the following:

Thoughts	Feelings	Behaviors	Physical Sensations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is hopeless • This is unbearable • This isn't going to get better • I am losing control • I can't deal with this • I'm a mess 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disappointment • Sadness • Depression • Grief • Frustration • Anger • Fear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pacing • Withdraw/Isolate Self • Lash Out • Avoidance • Distraction • Alcohol or Drug Use • Binge Eating • Excessive Sleep 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low Energy • Crying • Tension • Increased Heart Rate • Fast Breathing • Sweating • Shaking • Stomach Problems

Source: [Tolerating Distress, Centre for Clinical Interventions](#)

- **Commit to not escaping your emotions:** Once you are more aware of your triggers and warning signs and have acknowledged your distress, you can make a commitment to not avoid or run away from your emotions. People usually have automatic habits they jump to when they are feeling distressed, such as: avoidance, distraction, alcohol, drugs, sleeping or binge eating. Creating a stronger sense of awareness around your distress means you can now choose to take a different path and actively do the opposite of your usual escape methods.
- **Accept your distress:** You can use mindfulness as a way to soothe yourself as you sit with the emotions you are experiencing. For more information on this, review the Accepting Distress module from the Centre for Clinical Interventions.
- **Improving distress:** Finding ways to support yourself when you are feeling distressed is important for improving your experience of distress. The following are some ideas to get active or be nurturing during distressing moments. You can try different ones and assess which ones work best for you and add them to your tool kit.

Activate	Soothe
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise • Do yoga • Go for a bike ride • Go for a walk or run outside • Clean or organize something • Call a friend • Cook a meal or bake something 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grab something to eat or get a coffee • Watch your favorite movie or tv show • Play a game • Do a puzzle • Do something artistic or crafty • Do something thoughtful for a loved one
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a delicious snack or meal • Treat yourself to your favorite non-alcoholic drink • Light a candle or put your favorite scent in your diffuser • Sit by the river valley and enjoy the view • Go to your favorite place
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoy the sounds of nature • Put on your favorite lotion • Have a bath • Pet a dog or cat • Imagine your distress floating away • Focus on things to be grateful for • Practice slow belly breathing

Source: [Improving Distress](#)

Engaging Socially

One of the most common concerns reported by people during the pandemic was the loss of social connection and feeling isolated. As restrictions ease and public health orders lift, many people are eager to reconnect with their loved ones, friends, and community members. However, there are others who are having a sense of trepidation or dread about socializing with others again. Regardless of where you fit on this continuum, most of us are likely experiencing some level of anxiety and this makes complete sense. For over a year we were required to keep six apart, refrained from physical touch with our loved ones, wore masks, and only interacted with those in our household (or at most with staff at essential services). Additionally, for the sake of public health safety precautions, we had to see ourselves and others as potential carriers of COVID-19, which only heightened our feelings of threat towards others (regardless of if we knew them or not). Although access to technology allowed us to connect safely with those outside our immediate circle, many of us showed up with our videos off and mute buttons on. No wonder some of us are feeling a bit rusty with our social skills!

In the days and weeks ahead, we will be required to revisit our previous social skills and adjust back to having interactions with people again. Just as we didn't have previous knowledge about living in a pandemic, the same goes for coming out of the pandemic and adjusting to post-pandemic life. One thing is certain, there is no one right way to transition towards re-socializing, and you are the best person for deciding the process for returning to post-pandemic life. **Whatever level of excitement you may be having about socializing again, here are some suggestions for reconnecting in the post-pandemic world.**

Take Inventory.

Your social skills prior to the pandemic and how your social life was impacted during lockdown will likely influence how confident you feel about returning to

post-pandemic life. For example, if you can count on one hand the number of people you had contact with during the pandemic, being in a large indoor gathering with a bunch of strangers may make you break out in a sweat. Additionally, you may notice conversations that used to flow easily are now more exhausting, you may have forgotten how to behave around people, or have difficulty coming up with anything to talk about. In order to set some realistic expectations about your re-entry plans, take a few minutes to reflect on your social life/skills pre-pandemic and during your pandemic life.

- What was your level of comfort in social interactions before the pandemic? What were some things you enjoyed, what caused some anxiety, and what parts do you want to improve?
- What aspects of your social skills were impacted during the pandemic? Who did you remain in contact with? Were there any lost connections that you want to rekindle?
- Anything you longed for in your relationships during the pandemic?
- As you begin to venture out, any situations or issues that are creating some anxiety for you?

Based on your answers to the above questions, you can create a plan for what to do next. Don't know what to talk about? Come up with a few conversation starters you can use. Lost contact with some friends? Reach out to them to let them know you're thinking about them. Feel uncomfortable with strangers? At your next grocery trip, ask the cashier how their day is going. The most important thing is to have a few specific goals and actionable steps for enacting your social skills.

Come back with intention.

Slowing down over the last year may have allowed you to reconsider what matters to you - maybe you enjoyed having more openings in your schedule, or realized which relationships give you the most

joy. Take a minute and reflect on your pandemic experiences and schedule and evaluate what you would like to **keep** (e.g., regular self-care time on Friday nights), what you may need to **break** that was reinforced during social isolation (e.g., not reaching out to others), and what you may need to **build** for successful re-entry (e.g., reaching out to a trusted friend to discuss re-entry anxiety or incorporate).

Another consideration for re-entry plans is to evaluate your personal level of comfort with various social interactions. For instance, do you still plan to wear a mask? Do you prefer elbow taps over hugs? Are you more comfortable doing small outdoor social gatherings over indoor events? Evaluating your needs and preferences for managing risk of COVID-19 ahead of time will allow you to communicate it with others, and be present socially in a manner that respects your unique situation pertaining to exposure risk. Conversely, if you are hosting a gathering, make sure to review the most current provincial health orders, discuss with your guests about their comfort for attending, and share ahead of time what precautions will be made.

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Approach, don't avoid.

Like all of our emotions, anxiety has an adaptive value and is meant to keep us safe and protected from danger. Given that we were advised to avoid others and stay at home, our compliance with these orders for over a year may make it hard for people to venture out. However, continued avoidance and isolation from others as restrictions ease may only reinforce anxiety that may no longer be necessary. To work towards overcoming your anxiety associated with re-connecting with others, try:

- **Small steps.** One of the most effective treatments for many forms of anxiety is regular, gradual exposure to our feared object. Using approach skills (rather than avoidance) allows us to face our fears, re-evaluate predicted outcomes with actual outcomes, and gain skills along the way. When we take small steps rather than go all in can be a better way to tolerate distress and increase our chance for success. For instance, if you have fears about leaving the house, make a point each day to leave, even if it's a walk around the block for 15 mins. With each small step towards approaching your anxiety, make sure to acknowledge your efforts, give yourself a pat on the back, and accommodate the new learnings. If you had a harder time than you expected, make sure to be understanding about why it may have been difficult, acknowledging the task may have been more ambitious than anticipated, and then encouraging yourself to try something a little bit easier before taking on the task again.

- **Reach out and be reachable.** If your social network has dramatically shifted during the pandemic, you may be longing for opportunities to build new relationships. It may be helpful to reach out to your favourite establishments and organizations to see if there are any upcoming events. Attend various online and in-person events to re-familiarize yourself or to meet new people. Examine your class schedule, how many people are allowed to register? Will there be opportunities for small group activities such as lab work or field trips? If you want to increase your chance of building new relationships, sitting in a regular spot makes it easier to find you or strike up conversations with familiar faces.

Be kind.

Remember that many people are experiencing the same feelings and emotions and it's helpful and healthy to talk about it with friends/peers. It's important that we all respect the boundaries of others and maintain a non-judgemental attitude towards varying degrees of social comforts (e.g., some may opt to still wear a mask or ask for six feet of distance). We need to accept that there will be some awkwardness in our initial interaction with others and that we will all need time to readjust.

Contribution to Community

The University of Alberta is a dynamic community that flourishes on the connections between people. As we return to campus we must continue to work together to protect the health and safety of the entire community. It may sometimes feel overwhelming to keep up with ever changing public health information and maintaining COVID-19 precautions. However, science shows us our actions matter and precautions work! What can we do **as a community** to keep each other safe and return to full and enjoyable engagement in campus life?

Vaccinations

Vaccines, for those who are able, are the best way to protect yourself and all members of your community. Vaccines are available at no cost both on and off campus. Vaccines have been shown to prevent serious illness and reduce coronavirus transmission.

Need information about the types, effectiveness, availability of and eligibility for vaccines?

Stay informed with reliable vaccination information resources such as The University Health Centre, UHC Pharmacy, the University of Alberta COVID-19 website, Alberta's COVID-19 Vaccine Program, The Government of Canada - Vaccines for COVID-19, your primary care physician, or your local pharmacy. The Alberta Health Services website also has some COVID-19 translated resources. [Fi](#)

What if you have a fear of needles?

Some people may be hesitant to get the vaccine because of a fear of needles (which may range from mild to severe). Although some individuals may need professional support for their fear of needles, some fears can be managed through the following strategies:

- Practicing relaxed breathing prior to the injection.
- Bringing someone to the vaccination appointment who isn't afraid of needles to provide support.

- Sharing your feelings with the health care provider who will be injecting you.
- Using distraction techniques including thinking about something you enjoy, watching a favorite TV show on Netflix on your cellphone, or listening to music.

Personal Preventive Practices

It is important to use multiple personal preventive practices at once, regardless of your vaccination status. We must continue to follow existing public health measures as directed by federal, provincial, and local laws, and workplace or business requirements. While these measures are constantly changing as new facts are emerging, it is important to be aware of current requirements. The most up to date COVID-19 information can be found on the Government of Alberta's [website](#) and the [U of A's COVID-19 Information HUB](#). Resources are updated regularly. In Alberta, privacy laws protect the locations of individual cases of COVID-19. Please respect the rights, health and safety of community members, and follow the U of A COVID-19 reporting protocols.

What if I want to continue wearing a mask in the future and/or follow other safety precautions such as physical distancing, even if or when they are no longer required?

It is important to remember that vaccines don't provide 100 percent immunity. Masks can provide additional protection. So, if you feel more comfortable wearing a mask to protect yourself or others, even if it is no longer required, it is your choice to continue to do so. This also applies to considerations of maintaining physical distancing, particularly in public places. We should consider extending our compassion and respect to those that choose to do so. It likely will take some time before life returns to a level of ease and comfort we previously enjoyed.

Social Media, Gossip, and COVID-19

The current pandemic is perhaps the first global health emergency where social media has been used widely. While social media has the potential to be a useful tool in helping ourselves and others, especially in maintaining social connections while we are physically distancing ourselves, it also has been a significant source of dangerous misinformation.

According to Statistics Canada, half of Canadians shared COVID-19 information they found online regardless of knowing whether or not it was accurate. Health misinformation can result in serious consequences and has been linked to influencing health decisions.

Assess the source of the information you are viewing or hearing, examine the supporting evidence, consider any personal biases (we all have them) that may have drawn your attention to this information and seek out factual information.

New Beginnings

This has been a difficult time in our collective history and it may be some time before we know the full impact of the pandemic. However, we may have learned some things about ourselves and others that we may want to build upon as we make a new beginning. While none of us would have chosen to go through this event, perhaps there are new habits which we have developed which can continue to benefit ourselves and those around us.

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