# **A picture containing text, vector graphics Description automatically generatedLife After Lockdown**

Lockdown has been very difficult for many people all over the world. It has been a huge **change** in circumstances, and we have learnt to **adapt** to a new way of living for a whole year. For some people, the prospect of the world opening up again is exciting. For many others, the transition from lockdown can be an **anxiety-inducing** period of time.

Periods of change can be particularly difficult for people with mental health conditions. When we experience change, we may feel anxious as we are unsure what to expect. After being in various lockdowns for over a year, ‘normal’ life can feel like the unknown. It is important to acknowledge your feelings around change and accept that you may be experiencing a lot of different emotions. This is a good time to use your healthy coping strategies and check in with yourself regularly.

***Feelings and emotions***

You may be feeling a lot of emotions in this period of change.

These are **very normal responses** to any challenging situation when we are faced with danger and uncertainty.

***How has lockdown affected us?***

Lockdown has allowed us to **avoid** a lot of anxieties. It has been a long time since we have been able to travel, mix socially with large groups, and even go into work – people who have been shielding have stayed in their houses for even longer. If you are anxious about social activities, crowds, and travel, you may have been glad for the opportunity to avoid them. However, avoidance is known as a **maintaining factor** in the cycle of fear…

*This is documented in psychological research as the ‘vicious cycle of anxiety’. Avoiding a scary situation does not give you the opportunity to confront your anxiety and use coping mechanisms. It also doesn’t give you the chance to see that a scary outcome won’t happen, e.g. your ‘worst case scenario’. (We call the situation you’re concerned about a ‘feared situation’.) Therefore, you may have a loss of confidence in your coping skills and your anxiety can increase the next time you are in the feared situation.*

Due to lockdown, we have not had the choice to confront our anxiety. Through no fault of our own, our anxiety may have been strengthened through avoiding contact with other people. Let’s apply the ‘vicious cycle’ to lockdown…

This means that the transition to life after lockdown may be difficult for a lot of people. Fear can stop us from doing things we want to do, such as seeing friends and family, building new relationships, being productive and successful, setting goals, and making decisions.

***How can we overcome our fear?***

Fear is a very **powerful** emotion and has a strong effect on our minds and bodies. We can learn to use fear to our advantage: it tells us when something is scary, but we can use that feeling as motivation to overcome our barriers. **Ask yourself:** what could I do if fear was not a barrier? How would overcoming my fear benefit me in the long run? Can you think of any goals that you could achieve if you overcame your fear?

***Helpful tips to manage the transition…***

**Plan activities.** Make a list of activities you enjoyed before lockdown: this could be meeting old friends for a coffee, going clothes shopping, visiting the gym, or anything you like! This can help you plan pleasurable things at your own pace, which motivates you to challenge your anxiety and return to the activities you used to love.

**Go at your own pace**. Throwing yourself in at the deep end can use up a lot of your energy levels, and you may feel tired and stressed. Plan down-time for yourself and continue to practise self-care and healthy coping mechanisms.

**Look to the future.** You may want to take this time to reflect on lockdown and what you have learnt about yourself. Are there new goals that you want to work towards? Do you have new priorities in life? Try journaling your reflections to help you plan for the future.

**Take small steps.** Looking at a goal can be anxiety-inducing after a period of lockdown (think the maintenance cycle of fear!). A technique called graded exposure could help reintroduce your previous rhythm of life…

*Graded exposure* is a technique to help us overcome a feared situation in small, gradual steps. Looking at a goal can seem very overwhelming, particularly after a long period of avoiding anxiety. The idea behind graded exposure is to break it down into more manageable steps.

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1. **Identify** the feared situation, such as going clothes shopping.
2. **Break it down** into smaller, less anxiety-inducing steps. You can have as many steps as you like, depending on what you are trying to overcome and how much anxiety is associated with it. An example could be:
   * *Step 1:* Leaving your house
   * *Step 2:* Walking to the bus stop and looking at the timetable
   * *Step 3:* Getting the bus into town and back with a friend
   * *Step 4:* Getting the bus into town with a friend and walking into a shop
   * *Step 5:* Getting the bus into town and going to the shops alone
3. **Practise** the smaller steps first, such as just doing Step 1 for a few days. You can then move up the steps as your anxiety decreases and you feel more comfortable
4. This will lead to **overcoming** the feared situation!

**Recognise** if you are feeling overwhelmed. Transitioning from lockdown is a big change and it will take time to adapt, just as it took time to adapt to lockdown! Check in with yourself regularly and see how you are feeling. If you are feeling overwhelmed, you can take a step back.

**Don’t compare** your journey to other people. Everyone has coped with the past year differently, and some people will need more time to adapt to life after lockdown. Find out what works for you!

**Talk to loved ones and your support network.** It may be helpful for family and friends to know that you are feeling anxious about returning to ‘normal’ life. Use your support network and reach out for help if you are feeling overwhelmed. You may want to clarify rules and guidelines for different places, such as schools or New Horizons, to help your confidence returning in person. Ask if you are unsure!

**Be kind to yourself!** Being in lockdown is not your fault. Try practising self-compassion and talk to yourself the way you would to a loved one. Periods of change are difficult for everyone and it is important to be mindful of your emotions and treat yourself with kindness.

*Thank you very much to Liz and Nekane for their contributions.*