

# Managing Re-Entry Anxiety

As lockdown measures lift across Canada, concerns about the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic remain high. The uncertainty of our current moment has produced what psychologists are calling “re-entry” anxiety. Navigating these challenges can be especially difficult for educators and school staff, who have to contend not only with their own uncertainties but with those expressed by students and parents as well.

If you are finding the process of getting back to regular routines difficult to manage, you are not alone. The following seven tips will help you take proactive steps to manage this anxiety, including suggestions about how you can support students or colleagues who may be dealing with these worries.

## 1. Focus on What You Can Control

Anxiety tends to worsen when we feel out of control. Although there are many aspects of the re-entry process that remain out of your hands, shifting your focus to the things you can control may help you regain your equilibrium. We may not get to choose our situations, but we do have a lot of choice in how we respond to them. Remember that you can take charge of your overall health and wellness by taking good care of yourself and staying hopeful. You may also find it helpful to limit your media and social media exposure, to avoid being constantly bombarded with stories and opinions about COVID-19.

## 2. Take It Slow

The technique of graduated exposure therapy can be effectively adapted to manage re-entry anxiety, especially when it comes to easing into leisure activities. For instance, if you are nervous about going shopping or using public transit, try going during non-peak hours and keeping your errands short. Similarly, you can help support anxious students and their families by encouraging them to take small steps toward overcoming their fears (e.g. working gradually from partial to full attendance and participation in classroom activities).



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## 3. Be Kind to Yourself

Practice self-compassion. The stressors and uncertainties of the current times may make it necessary to adjust your expectations about productivity and performance. Remind yourself that you are working under very challenging circumstances, and you are doing the best you can! Even if you feel like you are not on top of your game, take time to recognize and appreciate your many strengths. Treating yourself with kindness will help you to treat others the same way.

## 4. Model a Calm and Positive Attitude

As an educator, you are a very powerful role model for the students you support. By maintaining a calm and positive attitude, you can inspire those around you to do the same. When others come to you with concerns, do your best to show empathy and understanding, without getting swept away in distressing or fearful emotions.

## 5. Communicate Clearly

Whenever possible, provide clear information to students, families, and colleagues about health and safety guidelines and expectations. Even though both short-term and long-term plans may be subject to change, communicating regularly can help alleviate the anxiety of everyone involved. If you are unsure about current protocols, seek clarification. If you have concerns about workplace policies or needs for accommodation, address them with your supervisors.

## 6. Maintain Boundaries

Keep in mind that different people will have different responses to the re-entry process. In your interactions with colleagues and friends, do your best to give other people the space and grace they need. At the same time, be clear and confident about your own boundaries with friends and colleagues. Knowing and respecting your own limits is an important part of maintaining your overall wellness.



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## 7. Reach Out for Support

Remember that you are not expected to navigate this challenging time alone. If you are starting to feel overwhelmed, talk with your coworkers and supervisors. Reaching out to colleagues about challenges you're facing can be a great way to find solutions together. You will likely discover that others are having similar experiences, which can be very reassuring. If the re-entry process feels overwhelming, seek support from a mental health professional. Seeing a therapist or counsellor can be a great way to deal with work-related stress and anxiety. There are a growing number of mental health resources out there, and it's smart to turn to these resources as needed.

Re-entry anxiety is complicated, but it can be managed. Building resilience is an ongoing project, and it is something that is best done in partnership with others. Embracing what you are learning from present challenges will help you and those around you to become even stronger.

## Further Resources

- [Anxiety Canada](#) offers useful information and a wide variety of self-help resources for those struggling with anxiety, including the following:
  - [Mindshift](#), a free app that uses CBT techniques to promote relaxation, mindfulness, and other strategies for managing anxiety.
  - A helpful [list of tips for educators](#) who are returning to school during COVID-19.
  - An [online directory](#) listing free or sliding-scale services across Canada.
- [BounceBack](#) is a free skill-building program that promotes strategies for managing low mood, anxiety, and stress.
- [OpenMind BC](#) features a collection of mental health resources designed to help teachers and school staff support youth who may be struggling with their mental health.

[EASE Resources](#) has much to offer BC educators, including lesson plans on wellness.

