

Managing the transition out of lockdown

COVID19 and the stay-at-home orders has been a very difficult time for everyone, but particularly for people with an eating disorder, and their families. As a family you have been having to juggle so much more – working from home, supporting home learning, not being able to follow your usual family routine or access your normal supports.

With restrictions lifting in the very near future there are many emotions and responses that may be experienced. Some of these are outlined below:

- 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
- Uncertain 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”
- Some people with eating disorders can also be worried about people seeing them after so long; concerned that others may make judgements about their weight etc

It is likely that your child (and you) will feel many of these emotions and reactions, even at the same time. These feelings are likely to be big, and could easily become overwhelming. There is a risk of the eating disorder thoughts and behaviours getting worse in the context of so much change and worry.

As a family, talking and planning for these changes and the subsequent emotions, will be really important.

Talk

Set aside some time to speak as a family about how everyone is feeling about the 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. You may

also want to speak to your child individually about these things in case they feel more comfortable to raise their ideas and concerns in one-to-one conversations.

Plan

As part of these discussions put together a plan of what post-lockdown life might look like for you 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 your child 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. 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 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. Support can be provided in many forms and you know your child and their eating disorder journey so you probably already have a pretty good idea of what supports they need. Some of the ways that support can be provided in the transition out of lockdown include:

- Listening and validating
- Understanding the context of your child's reactions and responses
- Spending time with your child
- Distraction
- Routine and consistency
- Planning and practicing ways of re-engaging in normal life
- Advocating for external supports eg. A transition plan at school
- Being kind to yourself

Listening and validating

Your child will be experiencing a lot of change and a lot of emotions at the moment. 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 in to 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. We know too that uncertainty, change, and anxiety can make the eating disorder cognitions worse and make eating disorder behaviours more intense and more frequent. 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 the 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. It will be helpful to continue to provide a high level of support and structure around food and meal times, as well as continuing or establishing routines around other aspects of life too.

Planning and practicing ways to re-engage in normal life

As discussed above, planning will be an essential part of managing this transition out of lockdown. It may be helpful to build in ways that your child can practice specific tasks within the plan so that they can gain confidence and efficacy in managing the transitions. One example of this might be practicing ordering from a menu, as a step towards returning to eating out with friends.

Advocating for external supports

Transitioning back into life after lockdown holds many changes and potential challenges. Be proactive in speaking with your child's school, your family therapist, 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.