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Feeling some reopening anxiety? A workshop series is helping people cope with the latest transition

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METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

The COVID-19 pandemic isn't over yet, but lockdown measures and social distancing restrictions are starting to relax.

As people begin to step outside of their bubbles, a new symptom of the pandemic is taking shape: reopening anxiety.

What will the “new normal” look like? How will a return to the office feel like? Why am I feeling overwhelmed about getting together with the friends and family members I’ve missed seeing for months? Mental health experts say these are totally valid feelings. For people who already experience social anxiety before the pandemic, these feelings are heightened.

Safe Communities – a local organization that specializes in working with adult survivors of child sexual abuse – decided to take their knowledge of dealing with trauma and create a workshop on reopening anxiety.

“This workshop is to apply that knowledge to the trauma that the wider community is feeling at this time,” says Andrea Stoner Leaman, program manager with Safe Communities.

The three-session workshop takes place on May 11, 18 and 25 from 4-5:30 on Zoom. The workshop costs \$60. Those interested should register by May 5. The workshops are limited to a small group to create a comfortable setting and space to share personal feelings. More information can be found at safecommunitiespa.org.

Neeta Dedhia, Safe Communities' office manager and group facilitator, will be leading the workshops. Dedhia is a Lancaster health professional specializing in homeopathy and alternative medicine and previously worked with teachers in New York City to cope with post-traumatic stress after 9/11.

The workshops will focus on identifying triggers, creating coping strategies and developing a small network of likeminded people.

“Each workshop has different relaxing activities and different coping mechanisms to develop resilience so that even after the pandemic is over you’re prepared whenever anything triggers you,” says Dedhia. “The everyday stress in life doesn’t really go away. There will be other things that trigger the anxiety and the stress so the goal is to develop that resilience in yourself.”

A couple of the ways to deal with reopening anxiety include implementing coping strategies and allowing yourself to say no.

“The key is to create our own boundaries,” says Dedhia. “One thing that the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us is that life doesn’t have to be so crazy. We have to cut back on the activities and prioritize what is really important.”

At work and in social situations Dedhia says the key is communication.

“It’s ok to say no (to something) if it’s overwhelming or if you feel like you can’t handle it,” says Dedhia. “And give a reason why. That’s what I tell everyone – say no and give a reason why you can’t do it. Most of the time when you say no and give the reason behind it, the other person will listen and understand. Who knows maybe they are going through something similar and it gives them the chance to say ‘You know what? I agree. Let’s not do this.’”

And as workers begin to return to the office, that open communication will be vital in determining a safe and healthy workplace too.

“Instead of assuming what people feel and developing blanket policies, employers and managers should, if they can, hold meetings and talk to employees and come up with mutually agreed on procedures that would be best,” says Dedhia.

Another, smaller, but effective coping strategy that Dedhia suggests is to have some tangible objects on your person that can engage your senses and provide a sense of comfort whether that’s a fidget spinner, a peppermint or some other treat. You could also listen to music on your phone.

Another thing Dedhia wants people to keep in mind is that the pandemic isn’t over yet. Dedhia says she thinks people should still be wearing masks and even people who’ve been vaccinated should still keep six feet of social distance with others. And if you are gathering, consider doing it outside instead of inside whenever possible.

“This is the way to give someone a sense of control and protection,” says Dedhia.

The workshops will also give people a chance to voice feelings, concerns and even provide a sense of normalcy.

“Human beings are social animals. We weren’t designed to live like hermits,” says Dedhia. “It’s good to find like-minded people who you can bond with.”

If you're feeling anxiety about reopening and would be interested in sharing your thoughts for a future story on the subject, please email Mike Andrelczyk at mandrelczyk@lnpnews.com.