



MASSACHUSETTS
GENERAL HOSPITAL
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL
TEACHING HOSPITAL

**BRAIN
HEALTH
INITIATIVE**



**ACADEMY FOR
BRAIN HEALTH
AND PERFORMANCE**

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Brain Health Matters: Moving Toward the New Normal Makes a Difference

After months of quarantining and social distancing because of the pandemic, many people are talking about their desire to “just get back to normal.” But back to normal, is not realistic and that can be scary. Currently we are cultivating a new normal and that means something different to each of us. Whether we are working or learning from home or in an environment that provides protection from the spread of the coronavirus, one thing that is certain is that we will all be taking a different approach to dealing with our risks and fears of the known and unknown.

The Fear of Getting Back to Normal

A slow reopening may still be too fast for some people. The fears caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will remain for some time. These fears vary from person to person, but for many people the fear of leaving our safe environment can be paralyzing.

In a [recent article](#), Jason Krompinger, PhD, director of psychological services and clinical research at McLean Hospital’s OCD Institute, said this anxiety is not surprising. “This speaks to how powerfully our behavior can influence our thoughts and feelings. Even if a person has not been very afraid of coronavirus, they have effectively ‘acted’ fearful by following lockdown orders,” he said. “So, it is not unusual for the body’s threat detection system to activate when heading back out of our homes.”

These fears can manifest in symptoms ranging from low-level physiological discomfort, such as increased heart rate or respiration to full on panic attacks with racing heart, heavy breathing, and fears of losing control or even dying. Our fears should fade over time as we continue to go about our lives. A staged approach allows us to gradually return to what is sure to be a new normal.

There is no question that these are stressful and, in some ways traumatizing, times for most of us, and that includes our kids. Since April, children in this country have been told to stay inside, to wash their hands and to wear a mask. Between what they have seen on the news and social

media and in some cases, what they have experienced with their own families and friends, many children are seeing the outside world as a dangerous place.

Back to-school is often an exciting time for kids, but this coming school year could be an exception. Recently, Dr. Neha Chaudhary, child and adolescent psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School and co-founder of Stanford Brainstorm, said some kids will have an easier time making the transition back to in-person schooling than others. For kids who may already struggle with anxiety, leaving the house and being with other children will present significant challenges.

For us and our children, the fears should fade over time as we continue to go about our lives. A staged approach allows us to gradually return to what is sure to be a new normal.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO BOOST YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Returning to normal means taking a risk, and there are some things that can help ease the transition, protect your brain health and reduce risk of brain illness.

- **Understand the rules and take precautions.** If you are planning to go out in public, adhere to the guidelines put forth by the CDC and local governments with the goal of *mitigating*, not eliminating, the risk.
- **Accept a level of uncertainty.** Attempting to get rid of all uncertainty will lead to increasing levels of anxiety. Try to understand that there are things that you just can't change.
- **Decide what risks you are willing to take.** Find things that you are willing to do and identify why they are meaningful. Maybe you are willing to dine out with family because it represents a family ritual that is important to you. Or, perhaps you want to return to the workplace even though you are still allowed to work from home to show solidarity with those who don't have the option of working offsite.
- **Get outside with your kids.** Your kids (and you) need to see the blue skies and puffy clouds, white sandy beaches and aqua water, green trees and colorful flowers. They need to see other children laughing and playing and have a chance to join the fun. It is possible to practice safe distancing, wear a mask and still enjoy being outdoors.
- **Seek professional help.** If your anxiety is preventing you from transitioning out of safer at home and are unable to do the things you want to do, it may be a good time to seek professional assistance.
- **Increase Brain Healthy Lifestyle Habits into your daily routine.** For example, try a new brain healthy food, experiment with a new method to increase physical activity, get good sleep, remain socially connected, think positive thoughts and experience positive emotions, stimulate yourself by trying something new, engage in something meaningful and that gives you a sense of purpose, pay attention to your general health, get outside, dance, laugh and engage in the arts and culture offered in the community.

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI works collaboratively with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, research, innovation and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and performance optimization*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.***

To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).