

Rebuilding Social Connections (After the Pandemic Ends)

Source: [Workplace Options](#)

For many people, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted social life, preventing or restricting in-person time with friends. As the recommendations for social distancing extended from weeks to months, many people have become used to the habits of isolation.

As more people get vaccinated, the risk of serious illness from COVID-19 will go down, and in-person interactions will become safer. Depending on where you live and how far along vaccinations are progressing, society may be in various stages of reopening for good.

Some people will easily and gladly resume their former social lives, perhaps with an even greater appreciation of time spent with friends. For others, the habits of social isolation may be harder to change. Fear of infection may linger, making in-person interactions less comfortable, and the easy give-and-take of social life may not come as easily after so much time alone.

Because friendships and supportive relationships are so important to your wellbeing and health, it's worth making the effort to push yourself past any initial hesitancy to resume social life. You'll want to do that safely, paying close attention to health risks. You may be more comfortable doing it gradually, noting your feelings and reactions as you spend more time with other people. Make an effort, too, to kindly and safely draw out friends who continue to isolate themselves.

The experience of emerging from isolation after a pandemic is new, but many people have had related experiences – after silent retreats, extended illness, the end of abusive relationships, or recovery from addiction, for example. Some of what has been learned from those transitions can be applied to this situation.

Here are some considerations as you take steps to rebuild social connections:

- **Online and in-person connections are not the same.** It's easy to create and hide behind an online persona without revealing your true emotional ups and downs. Extended face-to-face time with friends is a much better forum for real connection and sharing. As you begin to shift from purely online connections to more in-person socializing, take advantage of that difference. With no video lag time, it will be easier to talk in person. And with a full read of body language, expressions, and voice tones, it will be easier to connect emotionally.
- **Be compassionate and patient** – with yourself and with others. Not everyone will be comfortable resuming social life at the same pace. You or some of your friends may feel shy and awkward at first or find social interactions exhausting. That's normal. Don't push too hard or too fast. Give it time, but don't give up either. Keep going, step-by-step, until you become more comfortable together.

- **Think back to your relationships before the pandemic.** What did you value about them? What made you uncomfortable? In which relationships did you listen to and support each other? Which friends seem to have your best interest at heart? Which friends lifted your spirits, and which left you drained of energy? As you resume your social connections, start with your most valued and mutually supportive friendships.
- **Be brave and resist fear.** It can be scary to reach out and reconnect, especially if you're worried about being awkward, embarrassing yourself, or being rejected. Be brave. Push yourself past those initial worries. Accept that you might feel uncomfortable with other people at first. Recognize that everyone makes mistakes at times. It's OK to stumble in your social interactions. It's part of being human. Good friends will appreciate you for who you are. If the first people you try to connect with don't have time or aren't ready yet, wait a bit and try again.
- **Counter negative thoughts with positive reframing.** If you hit roadblocks in your efforts to rebuild social connections, take a step back, and consider whether they are real or imagined. Are you reading too much into someone's slow response to your invitation? Might they be genuinely busy with a work crunch, young children, or care for an aging parent rather than avoiding you? Think of positive explanations for what you're observing. Challenge your negative and unrealistic thoughts.
- **Be vulnerable.** It's tempting to keep defensive armor up and present an appearance of emotional strength and steady happiness. However, if that's not the real you, you're wasting the opportunity and value of social connections. Of course, you don't want to unload all of your unhappiness in an initial get-together. Think how you'd react if your friends did that. Work up gradually from easy talk about work, movies, or sports, to more meaningful topics that involve sharing feelings. Don't be afraid to ask for help from a friend, and be willing to give help when needed.
- **Join a local organization or volunteer** as a way to expand your circle of friends. Keep in mind that it takes time and repeated exposure for friendships to develop. Someone you meet once or twice might seem to have little in common with you. However, work with them for a few months as a volunteer and a friendship may take root.

Measures put in place to help contain the spread of COVID-19 are gradually changing. Please remember to follow public health directives for gathering and social distancing in your region.