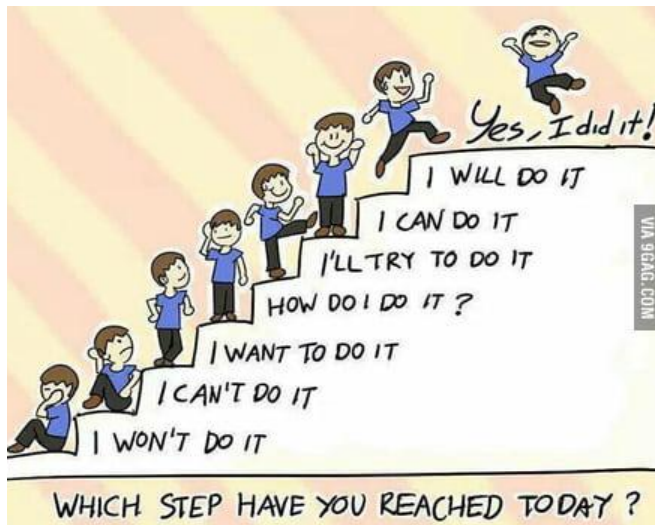


North Shore Center, LLC

August Newsletter 2021



Since the announcement of the vaccine's effectiveness, some consider "COVID over." No masks, no fear, only the desire to live wild and free. However, for other people, the thought of "bare-facing" highly crowded, open public places is more anxiety-provoking than COVID itself. In June, we discussed how COVID contributes to increases in anxiety, specifically becoming anxious in public. This month, Dr. Melissa Nelson answers questions about how we can accept, regulate, and embrace this newfound anxiety of the public world.

Talking with Dr. Melissa Nelson

Dr. Nelson is a licensed professional psychologist who recently became part of the North Shore Center family. Dr. Nelson works with children, adolescents, and adults who present a variety of psychological concerns. These concerns include struggles with emotional regulation, depression, anxiety, mood disorders, suicidality, self-injurious behaviors, behavioral problems, post-traumatic stress, and challenges with daily stress.

The Interview: What Now?

Do you feel that COVID has generated an increase in agoraphobia or a general fear of crowds and public places?

"Yes." Dr. Nelson finds that research on the COVID-19 pandemic shows a worldwide increase in depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. No, research does not explicitly state there's an increase in the fear of crowds due to COVID, but a general rise in feelings of anxiety due to the pandemic is a prevalent trend. Additionally, to say the pandemic increases people's fear of public places makes sense. Dr. Nelson says people are the most anxious when something is unknown or poses a threat. In this case, COVID is both unknown and threatening. How we prevented the spread was to

stay shut in and away from others; therefore, it makes sense that more people are worried about gathering in crowds and re-entering public situations.

How has the media contributed to the anxieties surrounding COVID-19 and re-entering the public world?

According to Dr. Nelson, the media reinforces fear. It is the media's job to warn people on the dangers of COVID, but the information in the media is overly dramatic and based on what people "will watch." Furthermore, we are experiencing this pandemic in an extremely media-centered and politically charged culture. Therefore, information about COVID is everywhere, and the type of information we receive is out of our control. Dr. Nelson says that social media tracks what we read and chooses which articles to feed us. For example, if you read about how hard and awful COVID is, media sites will advertise more about how terrible COVID is. Therefore, positive articles that discuss research progress and people's resilience during COVID go unread. Naturally, COVID becomes tangled in with political biases and front-page news stories. Dr. Nelson states that we unconsciously base our opinions of COVID on what the media says.

What would you say to someone who experiences anxiety surrounding the reopening of the world - i.e., someone fearful of getting back out there?

First, Dr. Nelson would like people to know, vaccinated or not, that it is entirely normal to feel anxious over returning to our pre-covid habits. Leaving home can be a mental challenge now that safeguards such as mask mandates and lockdowns are ending. People often think that getting the vaccine will magically make them feel better. However, they still struggle with their concerns about getting or giving COVID to others. Those who got the vaccine trust that it is an effective protective measure; therefore, they can judge themselves for worrying about COVID. However, Dr. Nelson states that the vaccine cannot prevent us from feeling vulnerable, and these feelings are entirely natural and valid. Anxiety, at its core, is not always logical; therefore, whether vaccinated or unvaccinated, the worry some experience as a result of this pandemic is inevitable—however, Dr. Nelson says that the best way to push past anxiety is to "do the hard stuff." Therefore, it is incredibly important to get back into the world.

How can we get back into the world? Can we self-practice exposure therapy?

Dr. Nelson says that exposure therapy gradually exposes someone to the things that frighten them and prevents them from running away and avoiding their fears. Dr. Nelson also says that, yes, one can practice exposure therapy on themselves. Like many mental health help books, there are resources to help guide someone through that process. However, if one is not ready to experience what frightens them on their own or at all, then a therapist can be readily available to them.

Can you give me an example of some ways someone could practice exposure therapy on themselves -- in relation to this pandemic and getting back into the world??

1. Ask yourself: “How can I protect myself?”
 - a. Educate yourself on the types of protection from COVID -- vaccine, masks, or both -- and make a choice that is best for you.
2. Ask yourself: “What can I handle as of right now?”
 - a. Choose to engage in activities that are both tolerable and challenging. That may not be a trip to the state fair, but it could be picking up the order IN the store or shopping for groceries at the outdoor farmers market.
3. Ask yourself: “How did leaving the house feel?”
 - a. Recognize that if you do not feel the same in these environments as you used to, then, normalize the idea that these settings likely won't feel the same again for a while.
4. See a therapist!
 - a. If you've completed steps 1 through 3, you've taken all the precautions, you've given yourself the time to process this new normal, and you still struggle to control your anxieties about the virus, then it's time to talk to someone!

What is the mental benefit of becoming social again? Why is it important that we take baby steps to go back out into the world?

According to Dr. Nelson, being able to sit with one's anxiety and not act upon it is a valuable skill because it helps one teach themselves how to tolerate and handle what frightens them. When someone avoids what scares them, they learn that never encountering their worries keeps them safe from their anxiety. However, facing one's fears teaches them that they may be worried for a time, but they will be okay in the end. Therefore, avoiding every threat is not necessary.

Also, Dr. Nelson shares that avoidance is a temporary strategy, especially regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Avoidance of what scares us during COVID means avoiding the public, avoiding being social, and avoiding living. According to Dr. Nelson, research states that the underlying models for explaining depression and anxiety rely on avoidance and isolation. The more we avoid, the more isolated we become, and the worse our mental health gets.

Wrapping It Up

The pandemic has reshaped a lot of our social routines and daily habits. Because of that, many of us may feel resistant to return to pre-pandemic life. However, it is essential to remember that avoidance of the world as we once knew it is NOT the answer. Avoiding public interaction is a short-term solution to a long-term problem. COVID will not leave anytime soon, and neither will our anxieties about its spread. However, social isolation will relieve our stress now, but it will have a lasting hurt on our mental health. According to Dr. Nelson, “Avoiding is the bandaid when we need stitches.” So, rip off the bandaid and GET BACK OUT THERE, BABY!!!!