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## Isolation versus reintegration - which is harder?

While many are longing for a return to 'normal' following the isolation and restrictions of COVID-19, expert advice points to 'reintegration' being another phase of great challenges.

Dr Kimberley Norris, University of Tasmania clinical psychologist and authority on confinement and reintegration, compares reintegration to a highly amplified version of the 'culture shock' experienced when people return home after travelling – or to people's experiences after long periods of working in Antarctica or space.

"Everyone is holding out for restrictions to be eased, and there is a widespread assumption that everything will be wonderful - however, reintegration comes with its unique difficulties," Dr Norris said,

While there will be initial elation at 'reuniting' with loved ones and engaging in the activities people used to enjoy, Dr Norris said to expect an emotional dip a few weeks later when many will experience 'reverse culture shock' as the realities of our former everyday life re-emerge.

This can include agitation at being stuck in traffic again, stress about racing children to school and sports training and dealing with personal or work issues that were put on the back burner during isolation.

Essential workers may experience the 'let down phenomenon' as they move from a challenging environment that required a lot of effort to navigate but was personally meaningful, back to the 'every day.'

People may also experience Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), where they engage in erratic behaviour and flout restrictions because they don't know when they will be able to do something again.

Or people may simply feel angst and apprehension about engaging with society again.

Dr Norris said the key to many of these issues would be to transition slowly, with full adjustment often taking up to 12 months for some people.

"Relaxation of restrictions in this first instance means that our health system is better able to manage any spikes in transmission, not that the virus has gone," Dr Norris said.

"People might be feeling they've got to make up for lost time, but that is the worst thing we can be doing - we need to take things slowly.

"We have to develop shared experiences all over again and slowly spending time together will help us establish a new sense of normal."

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