



A COVID-19 RESOURCE FOR BUSINESSES,
LEADERS AND EMPLOYEES

THE PATH BACK FROM SOCIAL ISOLATION

A GUIDE BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR KIMBERLEY NORRIS





An introduction to Kimberley Norris

Associate Professor Kimberley Norris is a psychological scientist and clinical psychologist who works across academic, research and clinical practice settings. Her overarching research and academic interests are focused on maximising human health, wellbeing and performance in both normal and extreme environments. Her research interests include adaptation and resilience in both extreme (e.g. Antarctica, space and FIFO) and more normative (e.g. academic) environments. Through her work, Kimberley develops new and innovative ways to provide psychological support for individuals in remote, rural, maritime and extreme environments at an individual, organisational and familial level.

Kimberley Norris' relevant research publications



Positive psychological outcomes following Antarctic deployment



Mood fluctuation in Antarctic expeditioners: does one size fit all?

A no-charge, fully online short course

The Path Back From Social Isolation

Learn about the psychology of reintegrating after isolation

This course will introduce you to the science behind psychological adaptation and reintegration following isolation. With an emphasis on the workplace context, you will learn about the psychological impacts of isolation, what to expect when moving back into society post-isolation, and methods to support staff and yourself through challenges associated with the reintegration experience.



short-courses.utas.edu.au/courses/Social-Isolation

HOW BEST TO RIDE THE 'ROLLER COASTER'

We are now in the fourth psychological stage of life under lockdown, where some of us will thrive and others will need additional support

Three phases of isolation have preceded this: confused panic, a brief 'honeymoon period' and resentment.

Now we are in the 'reunion' phase, the final chapter as restrictions are gradually lifted and reintegration into society begins.

Many of us will feel energised by the prospect of planning post-lockdown celebrations and embracing life after COVID-19, while some will be overwhelmed by the uncertainty of the 'new normal' – or what scientists call 'reverse culture shock'.


There's a degree of apprehension about how life will look, because we realise that it won't be the same as it used to be. It's not a case of simply picking up where we left off, according to University of Tasmania Associate Professor Kimberley Norris (see bio opposite).

From her study of researchers spending prolonged periods in extreme isolation, Associate Professor Norris expects that we will experience a 'rollercoaster' of emotions, with waves of joy quickly overtaken by anxiety and panic.

Anybody who is experiencing anything difficult is having an absolutely normal reaction to an abnormal environment, she assures us.

In this resource, she explores what we know about social isolation and why it matters, and how we can best re-enter a previously familiar environment.

This resource is designed to help us embrace the 'new normal', with a focus on maintaining our health and mental wellbeing, knowing that some of us will be struggling. If you are, immediate assistance is available by calling your local doctor or:

Lifeline 24/7 Helpline	13 11 14
Beyond Blue 24/7 Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service	1800 512 348
Rural, Alive and Well	1300 4357 6283
The UTAS Psychology Clinic COVID-19 telehealth services	 View details



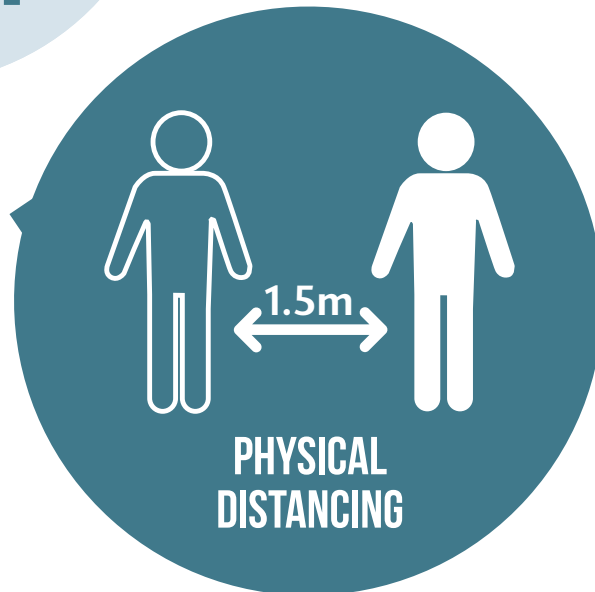
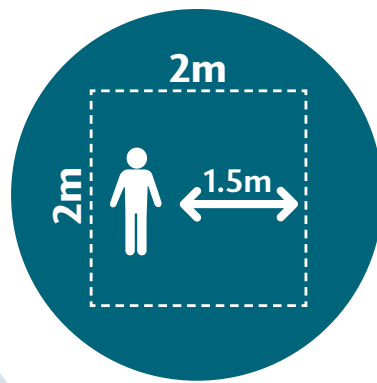
Hollybank Mountain Bike Park,
Underwood, Tasmania
Image credit: Flow Mountain Bike

COVID-19 WHEN THE WORLD CHANGED AROUND US



GLOBAL EMERGENCY

The World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020.



HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS EVOLVED

December 31, 2019

China reports a cluster of cases of a pneumonia-type illness in Wuhan, Hubei Province.

January 2020

A novel coronavirus (now known as COVID-19) is identified and evidence of person-to-person transmission in China is confirmed. By late January, cases in China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Nepal, USA, Canada and France emerge. The first case in Australia is also recorded. On January 30, WHO declares a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, with close to 9,826 confirmed cases worldwide.

February

The first cases in Italy, Iran, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa are recorded. The USA reports its first official death.

March

COVID-19 spreads around the globe, with cases surpassing 750,000 and more than 36,000 deaths. Australia's first fatality is announced and panic-buying begins. WHO declares a global pandemic and stock markets suffer the greatest single-day fall since 1987. On March 24 it is announced the Tokyo Olympics will be delayed for one year.

April

Global cases pass three million, with close to 220,000 deaths. Multiple companies announce vaccine programs.

May

Two of the world's largest economies, Japan and Germany, enter recession.

June

As of 5 June, cases exceed 6.4 million worldwide, with close to 383,000 deaths. Community restrictions begin to lift in stages around the world as transmission rates begin to slow.

We tend to function best when we know what to expect, and what is expected of us. When life is predictable, we feel more in control and better able to navigate the world around us.

This is one of the reasons that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions had such a large impact on us as individuals and as a society – we didn't have a frame of reference from which to work or to guide our behaviour. Our world was no longer predictable and no longer safe. Our world had been transformed into an extreme and unusual environment, for which none of us was prepared.

At first, many of us experienced a combination of shock and disbelief at the

restrictions being imposed and fear for our health and the health of those important to us. At the same time, there was also a degree of excitement and novelty around not just having permission – but being required – to remain at home outside of essential activities.

We embraced baking trends, online meetings and wearing casual clothes. However, it was not long before this novelty began to wear off, and we started to yearn for the freedoms we previously enjoyed. The longer the isolation restrictions continued, the more dissatisfied we became with the situation. We wanted to resume 'normal' life and believed that relaxation of restrictions would mean the end of challenges that isolation brought.

As restrictions ease and people prepare to reintegrate with society, a new set of challenges emerge.



WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL ISOLATION?

Isolation brings a range of experiences, and most of us experience a combination of both challenging and positive outcomes.

POSITIVE IMPACTS

Although we may experience irritabilities and frustration, in the longer-term successfully navigating isolation leads to increased tolerance when dealing with everyday challenges.

The 'serenity' that can come from being socially isolated, of being removed from the everyday pressures of constant social interaction, commuting to and from work, and attempting to balance multiple commitments across our personal and professional lives, can create the space for us to reflect on our values and aspects of our identity that we may not otherwise find the time for.

Being at home in isolation can create the opportunity to spend more time on activities that we enjoy and help to enhance our wellbeing.

By experiencing challenges such as those posed by isolation, we are driven to higher levels of functioning that we would otherwise not have achieved, an outcome known as 'growth'.

This growth is often facilitated by the new activities and personal insights afforded by isolation. It can include new hobbies and self-care activities that are personally meaningful and bring a sense of purpose to our lives and help us to enhance our health, performance, and wellbeing.

CHALLENGES

Isolation can lead to a sense of loss of personal identity and purpose, particularly when we are unable to engage in our normal work and social routines.

Without having the regular social cues that help us know if we are performing at the expected level, we can find ourselves overworking and creating unrealistic expectations of performance that can lead to burnout.

The increased stressors associated with isolation mean that the demands on our brain (cognitive load) are also increased. As we have a finite capacity, this means we often see decreased attention, concentration, memory, and problem-solving abilities at this time.

This increased cognitive load can also lead to negative mood states, including irritability, anxiety and frustration. This is particularly true for people with pre-existing mental health difficulties.



THE PATTERNS OF RE-ENTRY

Even though we are re-entering a previously familiar environment, it's not simply a matter of picking up where we left off. We have changed, society has changed, and the world has changed.

How we move back into the workplace will be influenced by a number of factors, including our pre-isolation wellbeing, our experiences during isolation, and the strategies we use to navigate our post-isolation lives. The reintegration experience will not be the same for all of us, and different people will be at different phases of the reintegration experience at any given time.

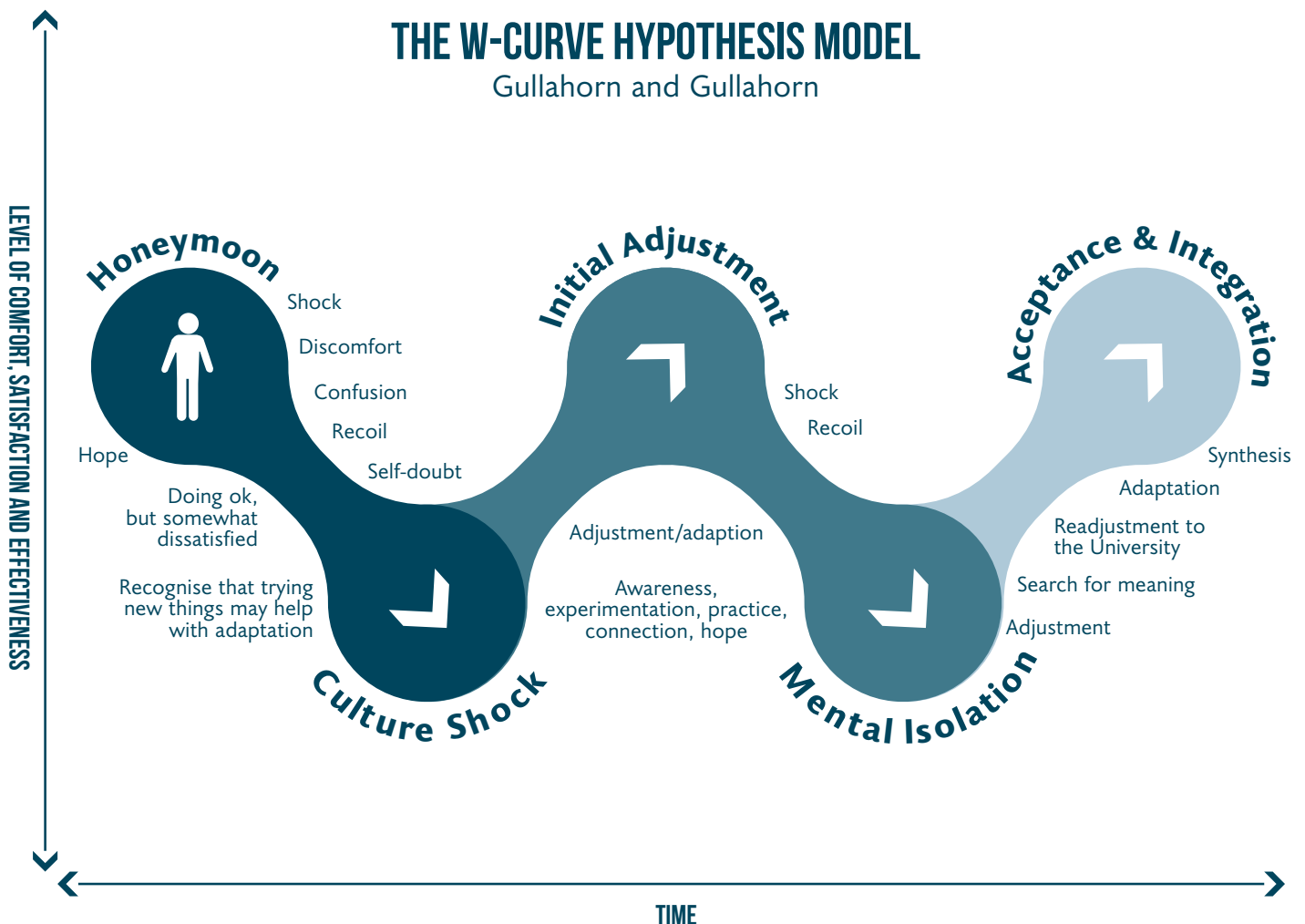
The increased demands that reintegration places on our brain can also mean that we find it harder to concentrate, remember, and problem solve than before our isolation experience. Our needs during this time will differ.

Typically, the early stages of reintegration will be characterised by a mixture of excitement and apprehension. We will both be looking forward to, and a bit nervous about, moving back into business-as-usual. We may find the increased number of people, traffic, sounds and visual distractions somewhat overwhelming. At the same time, the opportunity to interact with a range of different people may be a welcome change.

The next phases of reintegration involve a pattern of ups and downs in mood and cognitive load as everyday routines fall into place and the novelty of returning to the workplace wears off. Most of us will cycle through these phases repeatedly over the next six-12 months.

THE W-CURVE HYPOTHESIS MODEL

Gullahorn and Gullahorn



Adapted from: Hoffenburger, K., Mosier, R., & Stokes, B. (1999). Transition experience. In J.H. Schuh (Ed.), Educational programming and student learning in college and university residence halls. Columbus, OH: ACUHO-I

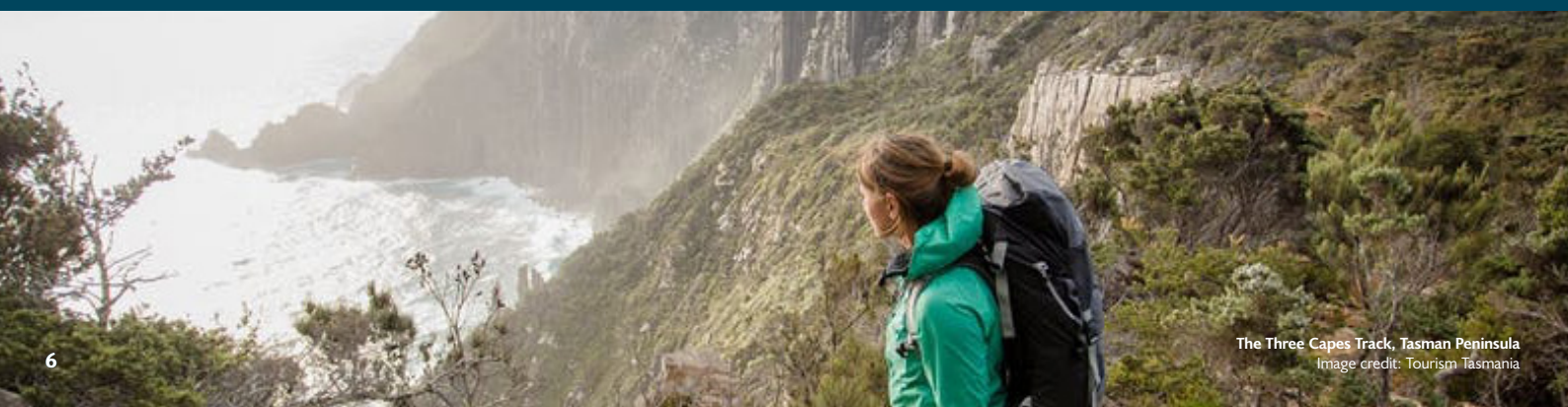


HELPING PEOPLE COPE (LEADERS)

- 1** Create opportunities to re-establish community in a graduated manner. Consider morning/afternoon teas and other informal catch-ups that provide a space for people to reconnect and re-establish their sense of belonging in the workplace.
- 2** Recognise that staff are likely to be at different points on the reintegration journey and will have different needs based on this. Reintegration is a gradual process, and when people feel safe and supported this process is more successful.
- 3** Set achievable and appropriate goals/expectations and help staff to do the same. Having a shared set of realistic expectations reassures staff of their value, and increases a sense of safety and trust in the workplace – key factors for reintegration and also productivity.
- 4** Provide written summaries of key actions/discussions to all staff as this assists in managing cognitive load, which is increased during the reintegration period.
- 5** Acknowledge and validate the contributions of staff, including in domains that may not fall under key performance indicators (KPIs). Simple acts such as personally welcoming staff back onsite are very powerful.
- 6** Encourage taking of leave where possible as this will help with psychological processing of isolation experiences, which in turn will help with recovery. Isolation was not a holiday; it was a survival strategy.
- 7** Provide access to resources orienting staff to the psychological aspects of reintegration and self-care strategies – this particular resource is a good start.

HELPING YOURSELF COPE (EMPLOYEES)

- 1** Acknowledge our achievements – no matter how big or small they may seem, we have all achieved things during the isolation experience, not least of which is surviving.
- 2** Redefine achievement – part of acknowledging our achievements is understanding that they occur across all domains of our lives, not just in the workplace.
- 3** Make time to protect activities that re-energise and relax us - those things that helped us cope with isolation will also help us with reintegration, and can create a 'new' normal that can better support our health, wellbeing and performance.
- 4** Take leave/holidays where possible, as this will help with psychological processing of isolation experiences, which in turn will help with recovery. Isolation was not a holiday; it was a survival strategy.



HOLD ON TO THE GOOD THINGS

Irrespective of the challenges that isolation brings, many of us discover new things about ourselves during isolation that we want to carry into the 'new normal' to enhance our wellbeing and quality of life.

A key strategy to promote positive experiences during reintegration is to hold on to the things that make you feel good, and make time (as you will not find the time later) to protect them and ensure they continue post-isolation. Remember, now is the time to make new routines that embed these activities, and create a new, sustainable and optimal normality.

Think about the things you enjoyed doing during isolation – what was it about these activities that made them so valuable? In most cases, the reason these things had such an impact is because they were personally meaningful and provided a sense of purpose to your days.

Although work brings with it meaningfulness and purpose, you do not have to sacrifice the activities you enjoyed or benefited from during isolation. Instead, if you make time for these in addition to your work commitments, you will increase your self-complexity. Self-complexity refers to all the different ways you think about and assign value to yourself – for example, soccer player, caregiver, employee, author, avid reader ...

Greater self-complexity means that if you are experiencing challenge in one domain of your life, you can rely on other aspects of your identity to help you cope. Importantly, self-complexity is associated with increased resilience and ability to adapt to future challenges.

By holding on to the new skills and activities that helped you navigate isolation, you will see benefits to your health, wellbeing and performance in both the short and long term.





North West Bay, Tasmania



UNIVERSITY of
TASMANIA

short-courses.utas.edu.au/courses/Social-Isolation