

# LIFE

ACTIVE HEALTH • WORKING LIFE • BIG IDEAS • TRAVEL & FOOD • BOOKS & TECH • ART & ENTERTAINMENT

## Fearful about life after lockdown? You may have re-entry anxiety

● Phenomenon may be form of post-traumatic stress disorder, but you can deal with it

Yvonne Fonteyn

Johannesburg journalist Sarah F says she hardly left her home over the holiday season. She turned down every social invitation, including one to get together with old friends on Christmas Eve, spending the time alone at home with her dogs.

When another friend asked her over for a New Year's lunch with some former colleagues, she begged off again.

"I just couldn't bring myself to go," she says. "I'm terrified of getting Covid-19."

Sarah says some members of the family she was meant to visit at Christmas had Covid-19 some time before the dinner. "I was worried that they hadn't had self-isolated correctly, and for the right period." And she is dismayed that many of her friends have gone back to greeting guests at the door with a hug. "We have all had our vaccinations but still, I pull away as fast as possible and then I'm afraid I've offended them."

Sarah's concerns about re-entering life after lockdown certainly sound valid, but she concedes that there is an element of neurosis to her thinking and behaviour. "I go out as little as possible. I order my food online and the only places I go to are the doctor or my therapist. I suffered deep depression during the hard lockdown and that has made me reluctant to mix with people. But staying in and isolating makes me feel sluggish and even more inclined to isolate."

Professionals report seeing clients who tell them they have what feel like irrational fears about adjusting to life after the country moved to more lenient rules under Covid-19 alert level one. They feel anxious waiting in queues, sending their children back to school and re-entering the workplace. Sometimes they experience a pervasive feeling of confusion and worry that is not related to anything specific.

Writing in *Psychiatric Times*, American psychiatrist Dr David Seigler says: "This kind of anxiety is frequently seen in the severely isolated, the hyper-vigilant and those confined to certain places over a long period of time. Doesn't that describe almost all of us? Lockdowns



Not unusual: If you're anxious about going back into the world, you're not alone. /123RF/Daniilphotos

and social isolation may have been necessary, but they are not something our brains are used to, nor can we easily flip a switch back to normal."

Johannesburg life coach Judy Klipin agrees that these stressful feelings are not unusual, and are so pervasive that an expression has been coined to describe them: "If you're feeling anxious and uncomfortable about going back into the world, you're not alone. The discomfort associated with returning to the world is so pervasive it has its own name: 're-entry anxiety' refers to the fear and discomfort related to our re-entry into the world and aspects of our lives that we have been absent from during the Covid-19 pandemic."

"We are anxious about leaving our safe bubbles and venturing out into the world where we are no longer in control of who we interact with and how. We are anxious about the possibility of being exposed to Covid-19 – and other germs that we have managed to keep at bay for almost two years."

Seigler says the stats back up these perceptions. Though figures are not available for SA, it is probable they follow the US stats to some extent.

"According to the American Psychological Association, Americans are experiencing the highest levels of stress since April 2020, with 84% of adults

reporting feeling at least one emotion associated with prolonged stress in the past two weeks (anxiety 47%, sadness 44%, and anger 39%).

"One study found that 13% of individuals screened positive for post-traumatic stress disorder, despite Covid-19 not fitting Criterion A. [According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: 'The person was exposed to death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, in the after way(s): Direct exposure. Witnessing the trauma. Learning that a relative or close friend was exposed to a trauma.']"

Thirteen percent felt they had difficulty with lockdown, 11% feared difficulty obtaining supplies, 10% had difficulty self-isolating and 22% had fears of falling ill.

Being able to go out and start getting back to normal should be making us happy, he says, but many of us can't let go of the anxious feelings. "We are

**'WE NEED TO GIVE OURSELVES THE TIME AND PATIENCE WE NEED TO BRING OURSELVES BACK TO WHERE WE WERE'**

supposed to be excited about doing more things. But re-entry anxiety will not allow us to simply enjoy it. Cognitively, it makes sense: fear of contagion, feelings that the world has changed. I've heard people joking that their social skills have atrophied, or they no longer know how to dress for various occasions."

In Seigler's view, re-entry anxiety is an adjustment disorder, and there are some effective ways to deal with it: ● Seek therapy, especially cognitive behavioural therapy, which emphasises learning to recognise one's distortions in thinking that are creating problems, and reevaluating them in light of reality; gaining a better understanding of the behaviour and motivation of others; using problem-solving skills to cope with difficult situations; and learning to develop a greater sense of confidence in one's own abilities.

● Practise mindfulness, defined as being aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not reactive or overwhelmed by what is going on around us. It includes taking pauses to breathe deeply and slowly, and a meditation practice.

● Ease your way back to normal. Gradual exposure to more challenging situations will begin to extinguish the anxiety symptoms. Strong social

support through family and friends is beneficial.

● Take pharmaceuticals if needed. Seigler says that for patients with disabling symptoms, an antidepressant such as a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor might help them push through while undergoing therapy.

Klipin concurs that some of her clients report being anxious about having to make conversation and interact with others, and many other aspects of life we once took for granted.

"We are anxious about navigating our commutes. We are anxious about having the stamina to stay awake and alert at work all day, no longer able to have a power nap between Zoom meetings. We are anxious about how the family members (including pets) are going to cope when we are no longer at home all day every day."

Some of the tips she gives to her clients to help re-entry feel less overwhelming are:

● Allow the anxiety: It is OK to feel anxious and uncomfortable. Re-entry anxiety is an understandable response when emerging from an abnormal situation. Acknowledging your anxiety is the best way you can manage the feelings.

● Pace yourself: We need to relearn how to walk before we can run. Start small and short: meet a small number of people for a short time to start off with and gradually add more people and extend the length of interactions. If possible, go back to work for a few hours at first, then a few days and build up to all day over a few weeks.

● Speak up: Be honest and open about how you are feeling, your fears, your anxieties, your sadness and stress. People can't accommodate or support us if they don't know what we need help and support with.

● Ask for help: Be honest with yourself about what you can and can't manage, what you do and don't feel up to doing. This will enable you to ask for help where you need it.

"We are emerging from an extremely challenging and stressful two years and all of us are battered and bruised to varying degrees," Klipin says. "It isn't feasible to expect ourselves to pick up where we left off in February 2020. We need to give ourselves the time and patience we need to bring ourselves back to where we were."

### CORONAVIRUS VARIANTS

## Working towards one vaccine to rule them all

Lisa Jarvis

Pfizer and Moderna are starting to churn out doses of Omicron-specific vaccines, and they say they could have data on whether the shots are effective as soon as March. But is this the best way to build and maintain protection against Covid-19?

The world is breeding new variants so fast, it may not make sense to chase them one at a time. Global regulators don't necessarily think it's the right approach. The World Health Organization and the US Food and Drug Administration say Omicron-specific vaccines might not be needed, and that public-health agencies around the world – not drug companies – should work together to decide the composition of the next vaccines.

A wiser strategy is one that many vaccine scientists are already working on: the development of pan-coronavirus vaccines, capable of quashing any variant that exists or might emerge.

It's certainly possible that the Omicron-specific vaccines Pfizer and Moderna are working on will turn out to be useful, Anthony Fauci told me – at least for a while. But, he said, "we've got to be careful because you may be playing some sort of whack-a-mole approach as newer variants go".

In addition to advising President Joe Biden on Covid-19 response, Fauci is head of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, which is funding various efforts to create pan-coronavirus vaccines.

Chances are good that a new Covid-19 variant is already lurking that might look nothing like Omicron. Virus experts have been "humbled" by the range of mutations this coronavirus can produce, says Penny Moore, a virologist at the University of the Witwatersrand.

The changes in the spike protein – the target of our current vaccines – have jumped around from Beta to Delta to Omicron, enough to suggest that an Omicron-specific vaccine might be powerless against the next variant.

In a perfect world, the quickest way to end this variant chase would be to immediately vaccinate the entire world with the existing shots. Omicron has shown it can break through Pfizer and Moderna's protection, but these vaccines still defend against severe disease, hospitalisation and death. For now, countries with inadequate vaccine supplies are a breeding ground for new variants.

One smart way to fight back is to create and test pan-coronavirus vaccines – and lay



Just one jab: As companies keep churning out variant-specific shots, a longer-term ideal would be the production of a vaccine that targets all coronaviruses. /Bloomberg/File

out a plan to produce enough of these for all countries. But they can't be created as fast as variant-specific vaccines can.

Fauci estimates it could take many months or even, if we're unlucky, years to perfect them. But given the probability that the world will be living with Sars-CoV-2 for a long time, it's essential to try to build universal protection against any and all variants that might develop.

So what exactly is a pan-coronavirus vaccine? The term has become a catch-all for both vaccines that could protect against any current and future Sars-CoV-2 variants and those that could also provide immunity against Sars, MERS and any other coronaviruses that might come along.

Scientists have reason to be optimistic that either kind is possible. Design templates already exist for universal vaccines against flu and HIV. The trouble is, none of these designs has yet made it to the marketplace, and many have failed altogether.

Coronaviruses may be easier targets, however. Their built-in error-correcting mechanism causes them to mutate much more slowly than flu viruses or HIV do. So scientists in academic and government labs are working with a specific design that has shown promise against the flu: a nanoparticle studded with pieces of the virus that are known to be important for eliciting a strong immune response.

Researchers at many labs – including the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, the National Institutes of Health, the California Institute of Technology, the University of Washington's Institute for Protein Design and Northwestern University – are experimenting with various kinds of nanoparticles decorated with spike proteins taken from various Sars-CoV-2 variants.

The idea is that exposing the immune system to a few different spike proteins will enable it to mount a defence against any it might encounter. Last month, Walter Reed scientists published data

showing that their pan-coronavirus vaccine caused non-human primates to produce neutralising antibodies against not only Sars-CoV-2 but also Sars-CoV-1, the strain responsible for the 2003 Sars outbreak. These researchers have already begun an early phase one trial in humans to ensure it is safe and gauge the immune response it elicits.

Another experimental pan-coronavirus vaccine created by Pamela Bjorkman's lab at Caltech has room for even more spike proteins than the Walter Reed one has. She's preparing to begin a trial in the UK.

Another way to create a pan-coronavirus vaccine is to target the parts of the virus that remain the same even as it mutates, perhaps a small region on the spike protein. But because so many of the virus's mutations are on the spike, this may not be easy. Vir Biotechnology, which makes the only antibody therapy still effective against Omicron, is well on its way to identifying these so-called highly conserved areas on the virus, says Herbert "Skip" Virgin, Vir's chief scientific officer. The hope is that a vaccine targeting these spots could offer several years of broad protection against coronaviruses.

"But discovering these vaccines will take time," Fauci says. "It's not going to be tomorrow." In making the initial Covid-19 vaccines, scientists were able to quickly build upon years of work to make the spike protein in the proper shape to show the human immune system. Doing that again for whatever area remains unchanged in the spike?

"That could take a long time," Fauci says.

Directing greater effort into the projects could move them along faster. In September, NIAID gave out \$36.3m in pan-coronavirus grants, and that's a start. Getting big drug firms – and their vast research budgets – involved would also help. It's not too soon for companies such as Pfizer and Moderna to turn their attention to pan-coronavirus vaccines. /Bloomberg

### AT THE WATER COOLER

## What's up with all the fad diets?

Q My friends are always starting a new diet or fitness fad but never seem to lose weight. Why do they keep doing this to themselves?

A Those who sell fads are fishing in a receptive pond where the same middle-class fish will bite a hundred times. Another peculiarity that I cannot adequately explain is that otherwise-rational people, with the capacity to solve complex problems, often leaders in their fields and experts in dark arts such as science, accounting, mathematics and economics, are the first to fall hook, line and sinker for these gimmicks.

A question not published because the answer was ridiculously short, came from a



DEVLIN BROWN

postdoctoral scientist working for a multinational: "Which mass builder will help me lose fat?" I have personally recently interacted with an MBA candidate who proudly drinks bulletproof coffee every morning. We met at a coffee shop where he indulged in the most glorious sponge cake.

Friends and family, who asked questions a decade ago about how to lose fat and build

lean, useful muscle (and received the answers – in writing, noga!), have gone on with their lives, gained weight, lost weight, joined CrossFit, left CrossFit, tried personal training, indulged in a bit of boxing, have taken up running, switched to Banting then intermittent fasting, have developed ITB problems and moved to Bikram yoga, have had children, tried the cabbage diet, been promoted to executive committee positions, and still, at every reunion, ask: "So, what should I do to lose fat and gain muscle?" They're so desperate you could sell them anything.

Don't misinterpret this answer: if it weren't for fish desperate to be caught The Water Cooler wouldn't exist.

Neither would all those hippie places that charge quadruple the price for eggs because the chickens are happy. Why do we simply refuse to see the obvious? Why do we want there to be a secret recipe? Why do we instinctively believe that if we start eating like an impala we'll become as lean and agile, and presumably as healthy, as an impala? Who'd want to be an impala?

A few years ago, researchers published findings in the *Journal of Health Psychology* that found that people who had a high need for cognition, in other words, enjoyed challenging their brains and living an analytical and contemplative life (basically, a Business Day reader), were more likely to be

less active or even more sedentary than those who didn't have a high need for cognition and get bored quickly.

At the time it led to a few clickbait headlines like one in *Southern Living*, a US lifestyle publication: "Smart people may be slightly lazier, according to science". The researchers, however, were careful not to confuse a need for cognition and stimulation with actual intelligence. Were they talking about Twitter? *Southern Living* went on to clarify: "While the lazier among us may want to crow that this is proof of higher intelligence, that's not quite what the study shows."

However, that clarification may, wittingly or unwittingly, hold a clue about humans and

our love of fads: laziness. People pay personal trainers so that the trainers can change their bodies not quite grasping that they still have to do what the trainer says. Your friends are probably lazy, and who can blame them in this day and age?

Everything else in life has been made easier: Checkers Sixty60, Mr D and Takealot mean we don't actually need to leave the house to shop. We can download apps instead of paying professionals for services in almost any industry. If everything we want comes easy, why can't a good, healthy body?

Remember the Shake Weight and Thighmaster? A clever branding exercise that captures the zeitgeist can turn



Clever branding: Why do we believe that if we start eating like an impala we'll become as lean and agile? /123RF/Nick Dale

any household object or pantry ingredient into a wellness or fitness craze.

People will continue to fall for nonsense because the alternative requires hard work, discipline, dedication and

resilience – which does not have to mean the opposite of fun. We live in an age of convenience and entitlement – unfortunately, your body and wellness is earned. The rest is either a fad or dangerous.