

Returning to 'normal'...?

May 2022

 **mindhk**

A lot has changed.

The pandemic has been significantly impacting our lives for some time. Our [research](#) in early 2022 showed that **over 55%** of survey respondents indicated 'poor' mental wellbeing as a result of the recent wave of COVID-19. The restrictions during the 5th wave have significantly changed our daily routine, with our activities extremely limited due to restrictions, working or studying remotely and significant reductions in social gatherings. As time goes by, we have slowly adapted to this different way of living. Living with restrictions has become our 'normal', and **the prospect of these restrictions being removed represents a significant change for us.**

As social distancing measures start to loosen, we are starting to see a return to some of the busy, fast-paced hustle and bustle we previously associated with Hong Kong. For some people, **the relaxation of measures may be a source of excitement and hope**, offering a return to life and activities with less restriction. For others, **these changes mean facing the prospect of returning to activities and socialising that they have not engaged in for a long time, which may be quite daunting.**



It is understandable that different emotions may arise for different people during this time. Whether you feel relieved, anxious or apprehensive about the relaxation of social distancing measures, remember that any reaction is valid, and you are not alone in how you are feeling. Below, you can find a summary of some of the common reactions people may have as restrictions loosen and the world opens up.

Joy and relief



For some, **loosening restrictions is a welcome change**. Many people are eager to get back to some of the activities they are not able to participate in during the fifth wave. For people who feel this way, the return to a state of 'normalcy' and the opportunity to resume their usual habits and routines may be a source of great hope and excitement. Reopening may also provide financial gain and a sense of job security for some people.

Some people might feel sad over the reopening of the city, **especially when they have adjusted to ways of working and living under restrictions**. People might have gained an appreciation for new-found interests or habits they have developed over the pandemic, and for this reason, returning to 'normal' could actually create a different kind of loss: the loss of the life they have adjusted to.

Sadness and reluctance



Anxiety and apprehension



For some people, the relaxation of measures may **provoke worry and a state of apprehension**. People may have concerns over their health and the risk of catching COVID-19, particularly in crowded offices, on public transport and among students as schools reopen. People may feel concerned about the transition back to a work or school schedule which now feels alien to them. Some people may **feel worried about returning to the pressures associated with Hong Kong's fast-paced, hectic life**, as this may have previously been a stressor for them before the pandemic. For these people, there may have been relief in the reduced pace of life under the restrictions, and the prospect of returning to the previous levels of demand may be daunting; Some people may also feel concerned about the continuing uncertainty about future tightening and loosening of restrictions as time passes.

How does **change** affect our mental health?

Human beings are resilient, and we are wired to adapt and find ways to cope even in the most unpredictable and chaotic of circumstances. We strive for a sense of stability and control through stressful times of change. However, any change involves uncertainty, and humans dislike uncertainty! **A lack of certainty tends to cause unease and can trigger worry, feeding a vicious cycle of stress and anxiety**. Our minds are programmed to assume the worst and look out for threats, and this may affect the way that we think about any changes and the likely impact on us and those around us.

Transitioning back to our 'normal' routine can be challenging, especially when we have adapted to a new 'normal' way of living under the restrictions imposed during the pandemic. As we transition back to a life with reduced restrictions, it is normal to feel worried, stressed or anxious about the change we face. Transition and change bring uncertainty, which naturally will cause feelings of unease.

Coping with change

Regardless of how you may be feeling, it's important to recognise that any feelings or reactions to change are completely normal. Try not to pressure yourself to 'feel' or react in a particular way; your reaction is dependent on your individual circumstances, and these are unique to you. However you experience the return to 'normal', it is important to acknowledge how you are feeling, as this helps us to cope with the situation.

Here are some questions that may help you reflect on your emotions:

- **How do the changes in restrictions affect you?** E.g. life, work, study, relationships, daily tasks, self-care etc.
- **How do you feel when you think about things opening up?**
- **What do these feelings make you want to do?**



As restrictions change, try to slow down and not jump right back into doing things as you did before the pandemic. Take some time to consider what you need to take care of yourself and others. Here are some tips to help you navigate this period of change:

- **Take it slow.** It takes time to adapt and readjust to change. If you don't feel comfortable jumping right into gatherings and events, it is okay to take a rain check. Try to limit unhelpful behaviours (such as mindlessly scrolling through social media and the news) and gradually introduce helpful behaviours that allow you to nurture the parts of your life that are important to you, without feeling too overwhelmed.
- **Plan social events according to your capacity and comfort level.** After months of being restricted, you may be eager to schedule activities to catch up with friends and family, to make up for the lost time. However, you may find that socialising is more mentally taxing and overwhelming than it used to be due to the time you have spent under restrictions. Take it slow and **consider whether you have the capacity, both physically and mentally, to attend events.**
- **Weigh up pros and cons.** Try to weigh up any concerns that you may have about returning to a less restricted way of living, with the benefits that it may bring to you. Remember that your mind is likely to give you a cautious interpretation of the risks: that's what it's designed to do! You may have to push yourself out of your comfort zone a little in order to take the steps you need for your own health and wellbeing.



- **Prepare some tools to manage your feelings as you approach activities you have not engaged in for a while.** Whether it is mindfulness, breathing for relaxation, or noticing and labelling your thoughts, you may want to **plan some methods of handling any difficult thoughts and feelings that come up as you start to re-enter situations that you have not been in for a while.** This will help to ensure that you do not get caught in patterns of avoidance, and that you can safely resume the activities that are important for you to stay well. Here are some mindfulness mobile app you could try out:



Headspace
[App Store](#) | [Google Play](#)



Newlife.330
[App Store](#) | [Google Play](#)

- **Continue to dedicate time to any helpful hobbies or habits you have been doing during the pandemic.** There is no reason you cannot continue to benefit from any new habits or activities that you were doing because of the restrictions. Whether it's knitting, home workouts or Netflix binges, **you should continue to make time for these, if you are getting benefits from them.** This is particularly important if you are experiencing the reopening as overwhelming, as you can get a sense of stability from these familiar activities that have brought you pleasure over the past months. **Don't see the re-opening as the necessary end of your new found interests and habits - these can continue to be sources of pleasure, achievement and mastery for you.**





Prioritise self-care

Continue to do the things that keep you well, physically and mentally. These things are different for everyone but may include: Eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly and getting enough sleep. These things can be extremely beneficial for your wellbeing.

Consider gradually reintroducing any old self-care habits you used to enjoy before the restrictions made this impossible:

Perhaps you can resume swimming, playing/watching sports or going to the cinema. Engaging in regular self-care improves our physical and mental wellbeing, equipping us with the resilience we need to face further stressors as they arrive.

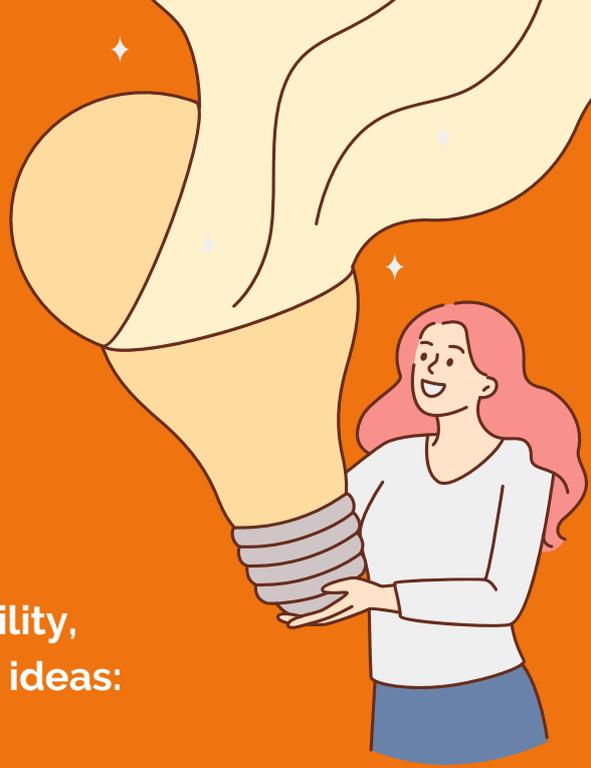
Learn more about other ways of taking care of your mental wellbeing [here](#).

Flexible Coping

Flexible coping skills are a huge asset, especially when we are facing lots of uncertainty. Our minds like predictability and consistency; this is why uncertainty can be so hard to tolerate. If we can learn how to adopt a flexible attitude, this boosts resilience and leaves us better equipped to handle changes we face.

Retaining the flexibility to cope with situations enables us to be more resilient in managing stress and challenges. Adopting flexibility in our responses to challenges improves our self-efficacy and allows us to become more self-aware, gaining a better understanding of ourselves and our values.





If you want to build skills in flexibility, you can try some of the following ideas:

- **Be ready for new ideas.** It is normal to be apprehensive about new ways of doing things. Even if you notice yourself feeling reluctant, see if you can make room for this and encourage yourself to be open to new ideas and perspectives. This can open our eyes to a wider range of possibilities, and could potentially help us to build strengths to overcome our challenges.
- **Get creative in applying your previous knowledge to the current situation.** Consider any frameworks and ideas you have found useful in your previous experiences (e.g. books, games, shows, past experience, etc.). Some of these may be helpful in coping with what you are facing in your life now.
- **Pause and remind yourself of your strengths and achievements.** Feeling stuck can be discouraging, and it can make you feel hopeless about the future. If you recognise that you are feeling stuck, pause and remind yourself of how far you have come and all the challenges you have gone through. The pandemic has involved huge change and uncertainty for everyone, and you are no exception. Help is always available.

- **Seek out stories from others.** Learning from others' experiences can be a great way of gaining perspective on a new situation. You may find that sharing with other people helps you to identify new ways of coping with challenging times. This may be particularly true of individuals who have faced their own struggles; we can learn a lot through hearing how people have managed their own difficult times and come through them stronger.

Hear from Mind HK ambassadors, individuals who have experienced and recovered from a mental health condition, on their personal experience, to learn more on how they manage their mental health in their journey, and how they are all #MoreThanALabel:
www.morethanalabelhk.com



Reframing 'change' as an opportunity to learn and grow.

It can be challenging when we find ourselves surrounded by uncertainty and change. One way of handling a period like this is to see the changes as an opportunity. Perhaps it is a chance for you to accumulate skills in resilience, or to practice responding more flexibly to difficult situations, thoughts and feelings.

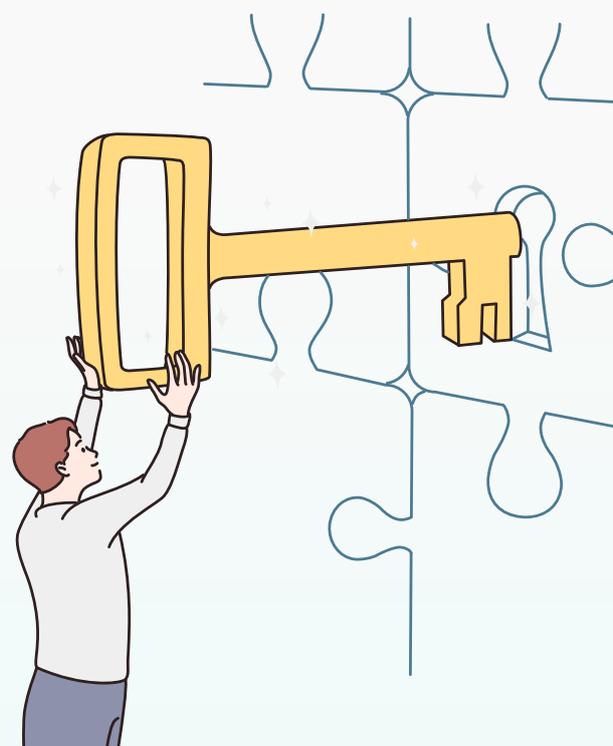


Key takeaway

Opening up may not just bring positive emotions, but challenging ones too.

Experiencing discomforts and unpleasant emotions towards change and uncertainty is normal - all reactions are valid. Although it can be hard to cope with change and the emotions arise from it, **there are things that are within our control and we could do to help ourselves overcoming change.**

If you find yourself struggling to manage the current situation, help is available - you don't have to face it alone.



Additional resources

A list of hotlines and immediate support:

www.mind.org.hk/find-help-now

Mental health services available from local NGOs for individuals who affected by COVID-19:

www.mind.org.hk/mental-health-a-to-z/covid-19/additional-resources/

A list of mental health services provided by local mental health organisation:

www.mind.org.hk/community-directory

Seeking help in Hong Kong and what to expect:

www.mind.org.hk/getting-help

About Mind HK

Mind HK (Mind Mental Health Hong Kong Limited) is a S88 registered charity (91/16471), which launched in 2017. Our vision is to ensure no one in Hong Kong has to face a mental health problem alone. Through resources, training, and outreach campaigns and programmes, we help to educate around mental health and remove the associate stigma, with the aim of achieving the best mental health for all in Hong Kong. With existing collaboration and research efforts, we are here to support Hong Kong in becoming a global leader and regional model for public mental health. For more on our work, mission and vision, please visit www.mind.org.hk.

Useful Resources

If you want to learn more about other mental health topics, please visit **our Mental Health A to Z:**

www.mind.org.hk/mental-health-a-to-z/

COVID-19 Mental Health Information Hub:

Mental health resources and local supports available to take care of your mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

mind.org.hk/covid-information-hub

Youth Mental Health Resources

coolmindshk.com/

If you are in an emergency or crisis situation, please contact 999, or go to your nearest A&E.

More local urgent support in Hong Kong:

mind.org.hk/find-help-now

More non-urgent support can be found here:

mind.org.hk/community-directory/

How & where to seek help in Hong Kong:

mind.org.hk/getting-help/



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CONTACT US

Address:

Mind HK, Unit B, 18/F
One Capital Place
18 Luard Road.
Wan Chai, Hong Kong

www.mind.org.hk

Email: hello@mind.org.hk

Tel.: 3643 0869

