

# Coaching People Through Re-entry Anxiety

Re-entry anxiety, or “Cave Syndrome” as coined by Psychiatrist Dr. Bregman, refers to the discomfort people feel when we leave the safe and comfortable environment we’ve created and acclimated to for a time. In the past year, we’ve all had to learn and practice new habits, like social distancing and not touching, which are not natural, but we got used to them and they provided us a sense of safety and comfort. Now we are having to adjust some of those habits of safety and relearn new ones. How people navigate this stressful time could either help people grow in resilience or put further strain on their mental health.

## Principles to Help People Through Re-entry Anxiety

- 1. Normalize Re-entry Anxiety:** According to an APA survey, nearly 50% of Americans, regardless of vaccination status, report feeling uneasy about adjusting to in-person interaction. It is natural to feel anxious entering a new situation with many changes and uncertainties, leaving the familiarities behind that have provided safety. Emphasize that what’s most important is not the feeling of anxiety itself but what we do in the face of it.
- 2. Goal: Physical and Emotional Safety AND Connection:** Despite the anxiety, it is not good for us to continue to socially isolate long-term if we can re-engage safely. Scripture tells us, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). And at the end of the creation account it states, “Adam and his wife were both *naked* and they felt *no shame*,” (Gen. 2:25). This is humanity as God intended: intimate and safe, both physically and emotionally.

And neurobiology bears witness to God’s design. While moderate stress for a time stretches us to grow, physical and emotional healing and restoration only happen when our bodies are in parasympathetic mode, known as “rest and digest,” which is our social engagement system. This mode gets activated when we are feeling safe and connected to others. The social engagement system brings many health benefits such as boosting the immune system and shutting off chronic inflammation, which is linked to many illnesses. So social disconnection, in the long run, is not only bad for our mental health but our physical health as well.

We should certainly be mindful of our physical safety but should not neglect to connect and socially engage in safe ways.

- 3. Start with grace:** God meets us with grace where we are. Biologically, when people feel judged or even judge themselves, it does not feel safe, so it brings them out of parasympathetic and triggers the sympathetic system, the “fight-or-flight” danger response. Feeling emotionally safe begins with love and acceptance.

4. **Help Identify and Empower:** What provides a sense of safety for each person is personal. You can help clients self-reflect and clarify their own challenges with re-entry—what they feel anxious about, what ways they need to be stretched, and what they need to feel safe enough to do so. Empower them to communicate their needs to others they trust. Remember to help clients identify and engage in spiritual practices that foster a sense of security and connection to God as well. “Fear not, for I am with you.” (Is. 41:10)
5. **Make it gradual:** While clients should avoid just opting for physical safety, they should also not push themselves too much, too fast. Doing so will kick in the stress or danger response. Help clients identify the particular ways in which they can wisely stretch out of their comfort zone and re-engage while still maintaining a sense of felt-safety. For example, if you haven’t taken the subway since the pandemic, it may be wise to take the subway again to go on a fun outing during non-busy hours, rather than riding it for the first time when you have to get to the office on time during rush hour.
6. **Do it Long Enough:** White knuckling through something for a short time does not help people learn to feel safe. If you just force yourself to do something quickly while holding your breath and feeling scared, the experience will reinforce to your brain that the activity IS stressful. The next time you try the same thing, your brain will still trigger the stress response. Instead, encourage clients to gradually do something that may be a little stressful but tolerable and to do it long enough for them to eventually relax into it and feel safe. That experience will teach them that it was okay. Help them also savor the parts they may have even enjoyed.

### Questions to ask to help your client self-reflect

1. As you think about re-entry, what do you feel? What do you look forward to? What are your concerns and stressors?
2. In the past year, what have you learned and enjoyed that you would like to keep?
3. What helps you feel safe and more connected to God? *(Help clients practice those things regularly to let His presence be a resource to them during this anxious time.)*
4. What about re-entry is out of your control and you need to pray and entrust to God?
5. What gradual steps can you take to ease yourself into re-entry?
6. And what can you do or ask for that would give you greater felt-safety as you re-engage?