

# Four Lessons From Your Anxious Brain

Pandemic life has saddled us with lots of conflicting emotions. Here's how to cope with feelings of uncertainty and make a fresh start.



Credit...Nathalie Lees

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**By Tara Parker-Pope**

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Feeling unsettled? Anxious? Overwhelmed? Welcome to the summer of 2021.

I asked thousands of New York Times readers of all ages to share [how they're feeling right now](#). The most common answers revealed the mixed feelings of the past 14 months: unsettled, anxious, overwhelmed, frazzled, tired, hopeful, optimistic, stressful, exhausted, excited.

Some readers said just one word was not enough to describe how they're feeling.

“Bored, anxious, hopeful — all at once. Is there a word for that?” asked one reader.

Ours was not a scientific survey — the respondents all had signed up for the [10-day Fresh Start Challenge](#), which delivered daily texts with tips for healthy living. But the answers are consistent with national survey data that shows many people are still struggling with the emotional toll of pandemic life. [The Household Pulse Survey](#), from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, shows that as of mid-May, almost a third of Americans (30.7 percent) were experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression. While

that number was down from a peak of about 42 percent in November, it's still alarmingly high. In 2019, about 11 percent of adults in the United States had similar symptoms, according to a comparable survey from the [National Center for Health Statistics](#).

Dr. Judson Brewer, director of research and innovation at Brown University's Mindfulness Center and an associate professor of psychiatry at the medical school, said many of his patients are describing themselves as feeling overwhelmed and frazzled. The emotions are likely to stem from the general uncertainty created by pandemic life. For the brain, feelings of uncertainty are like hunger pangs to your stomach, he said. While a stomach growl is a signal you need food, feelings of uncertainty are a signal to your brain that it needs information. The problem for many people right now is a lack of information about how life looks going forward.

"Information is food for our brain," said Dr. Brewer, author of the new book "[Unwinding Anxiety: New Science Shows How to Break the Cycles of Worry and Fear to Heal Your Mind](#)." "But when there is continuous uncertainty that we can't resolve, that leaves people feeling anxious. They can feel overwhelmed because there's not a resolution; the brain is not able to solve the problem. That leaves them feeling frazzled, tired and exhausted."

"The last year," said Dr. Brewer, "has created a huge amount of uncertainty in so many different realms."

The good news is that times of uncertainty are also opportunities for personal growth and building resilience. Studies show that periods of disruption, like moving to a new town or getting divorced — or living through a pandemic — can also be opportunities for breaking bad habits and starting healthy new ones. Here are some strategies to help you cope with an anxious, uncertain and hopeful summer.

## Build your distress tolerance

Worrying about what you don't know will just make anxiety and stress worse. But accepting that some answers aren't available right now can help you build an emotional muscle called "distress tolerance." People with low distress tolerance often turn to unhealthy ways of coping, like substance use or spending excessive amounts of mindless time watching television or gaming.

Telling yourself that you accept the current state of uncertainty can help, Dr. Brewer said. Try telling yourself, "I'll change the things I can, and accept the things I can't." [Identifying and naming your feelings](#) can calm the part of your brain that is feeling stressed. A multi-sensory exercise [like five-finger breathing](#), in which you trace the outline of your hand with a finger while focusing on your breathing, can help stop negative thoughts from taking over.

“As a society we’re not doing a great job of teaching ourselves to have distress tolerance,” said Dr. Brewer. “Just knowing we can’t change something, that we can’t get the information — that information alone can be calming. The most adaptive response is to be OK with the uncertainty.”

## Identify your best pandemic habits

A common source of anxiety these days is that the slower pace of pandemic life will soon be replaced by our previous, more stressful routines. “I would like to savor the slower pace,” said one reader. “I’m afraid we’ll go back to before-times levels of overscheduling.”

Katy Milkman, a professor at the Wharton School and author of the new book [“How to Change: The Science of Getting From Where You Are to Where You Want to Be,”](#) advises people to look back on the past 14 months and identify the changes you want to keep.

“One of the things I find really interesting about the pandemic is that it forced us to experiment in ways that we wouldn’t usually,” she said. “We were all forced to try Zoom or try different kinds of workouts. One important thing is to be conscious of what experiments were good. What did you discover that you want to keep doing?”

In her own life, Dr. Milkman realized she had been frazzled by the effort to orchestrate her energetic 5-year-old’s social calendar. “We were trying to do play dates regularly, and it was truly miserable,” said Dr. Milkman. “It was such a relief to realize, ‘Maybe we don’t need so many play dates. Maybe it’s OK to go on hikes together as a family.’ I think everybody had their own discoveries through the forced experimentation the pandemic imposed.”

To stop yourself from sliding back into old behaviors you no longer want to keep, ask yourself the questions: “What am I getting out of this? Is there a new way of doing this?” advises Dr. Brewer. He said the pandemic restrictions taught him to rethink his busy travel schedule. Before the pandemic he was traveling around the country to conferences, but learned he could be just as effective giving talks via Zoom without being away from his family as often.

“If we see an old behavior we might be slipping back into, it’s a matter of paying attention and being aware,” said Dr. Brewer.

## Strengthen your connections

Numerous studies show that stronger social connections help us cope with anxiety and build resilience. A number of readers during the Fresh Start Challenge said they were anxious about returning to old social routines.

“What is normal now?” texted one reader. “Looking forward to being with people again, but feel like I’ve lost my ability for casual conversations.”

During the Fresh Start Challenge, we gave readers [a list of 36 questions](#) to help them get social conversations started. The questions, designed to help people reveal more about themselves, come from a study called “[The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness](#),” led by Arthur Aron, a scientist at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

One reader shared that asking her husband the question, “What super power would you like?” revealed something she didn’t know about him.

“My husband told me he’d like to be able to stop time and restart it when he got caught up,” she said. “This gave me a better understanding of his feelings about time and how best to approach certain subjects with him.”

Although the questions in Dr. Aron’s study became known as [the 36 questions that lead to love](#), he points out that the goal of the questions is not to spur romance. Most of the time, the questions will help strangers to become friends, friends to become closer and romantic partners to feel more connected.

## Ask yourself, “What do I need right now?”

Lately, I’ve heard from a lot of readers who are berating themselves for gaining weight or exercising less during the pandemic lockdowns. “I feel out of control and self indulgent, particularly with regards to eating and drinking,” a reader told me. “The increased weight makes moving uncomfortable and lowers my opinion of myself.”

It’s important to remember that almost everyone struggled with balancing the restrictions of pandemic life. Shaming yourself is counterproductive. A large body of research shows that when we give ourselves a break and accept our imperfections — a concept called self-compassion — we’re more likely to take care of ourselves and [live healthier lives](#).

“One of the major things self-compassion gives you is the ability to not be so overwhelmed by the difficult emotions you’re experiencing,” said [Kristin Neff](#), associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin who has pioneered much of the research on self-compassion. “Give yourself a little kindness.”

Dr. Neff offers guided meditations and exercises to learn self-compassion on her website, [Self-Compassion.org](#). One of the simplest ways to start practicing self-compassion is to ask yourself one question: “What do I need right now?”

“If you’re judging yourself, you’re harming yourself,” said Dr. Neff, whose new book is [“Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power and Thrive.”](#) “What do you need to be well? Maybe what you need is not to lose five pounds. Maybe you need more self-acceptance. The more you are able to accept yourself, the more you’re able to make those positive healthy changes in your life.”

## Try the Fresh Start Challenge

10 challenges to help you live more mindfully.

- [Day 1: How Are You, Really?](#)
- [Day 2: Let’s Have an Exercise Snack!](#)
- [Day 3: Try a Fierce Meditation](#)
- [Day 4: Ask a Connection Question!](#)
- [Day 5: Resist Your Tech](#)
- [Day 6: Meditate On the Go!](#)
- [Day 7: Brush Your Way to a New Habit](#)
- [Day 8: Take a Gratitude Photo](#)
- [Day 9: Hug \(Just a Little\) Longer!](#)
- [Day 10: Give Yourself a Break!](#)



Credit...Nathalie Lees

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