

One Year of COVID-19

Moving forward in 2021



Coping with Vaccine Anxiety

Q&A with Dr. Bob Kocher and Dr. Joe Grasso

As we're all acutely aware, one year has passed since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 virus a global pandemic. The last year has been described as unprecedented, turbulent, tumultuous, and a myriad of other adjectives that fail to do it justice. Millions of people have seen their lives entirely disrupted by the precautions required to curb the virus's spread, and while news of the vaccine last December sparked hope for many, the reality of the vaccine rollout has been fraught with disorganization and uncertainty.

Many have experienced anxiety related to vaccination, with Mental Health America (MHA) reporting that only 63 percent of healthcare providers are willing to be vaccinated immediately. Reluctance toward vaccination is also prevalent among Black and Latinx groups, who have historically been the victims of discriminatory and dangerous health and economic policies as well as notoriously unethical medical research. An additional plethora of misinformation about the vaccine and its efficacy and safety, as well as the lack of planning around the vaccine rollout on both federal and state levels has led to more confusion and stress about the prospect of vaccination.

All of these issues may create feelings of uncertainty, frustration, fear, cynicism, and mistrust—all of which are valid. That's why we sat down with Bob Kocher, MD—



Hi, I'm Joe Grasso, PhD.

As a clinical director at Lyra and a clinical psychologist, my job is to share helpful, research-based insights with you—so that you can lead a mentally healthy life at home, and at work.



My name is Bob Kocher, MD.

I'm a Lyra co-founder and Adjunct Professor of Medicine at Stanford. I formerly served in the Obama Administration as Special Assistant to the President for Healthcare and Economic Policy.

Lyra's co-founder, an adjunct professor of medicine at Stanford University, and former special assistant to President Barack Obama for healthcare and economic policy—and Lyra's Clinical Director of Partnerships Joe Grasso, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist with over a decade of experience in providing psychotherapy and behavioral medicine interventions, to discuss the vaccine from both a public health and psychological standpoint.

In the following Q&A, Kocher and Grasso respond to some common questions about the vaccine, and ways to cope with and process feelings you may be experiencing around the vaccination process.

How are we going to return to “normal?” What is normalcy going to look like after COVID-19?



Dr. Kocher: Good question! I don't think anyone knows what will be “normal.” The best thing we can all do is continue doing what we can to reduce transmission of COVID-19 by wearing masks, avoiding indoor gatherings, limiting our daily contacts, and participating in screening test programs. We should also get vaccinated as soon as possible, since that will further reduce COVID-19's ability to spread in our communities. I suspect that the COVID-19 variants will persist until we can adapt the vaccines or create a booster shot. To reduce the risk of variants becoming problematic, I suspect we will continue to practice our COVID-19 safety measures until we can suppress the variants to very low levels.

I'm feeling a mix of positive and negative emotions about the vaccine. Is that normal?



Dr. Grasso: There is no right or wrong when it comes to emotions, especially around something as personal as receiving a vaccine. There are many reasons for positive emotions right now: For example, many people are feeling a mix of excitement and relief at the prospect of finally receiving the vaccine and the protection it will afford against illness. But uncomfortable emotions, like frustration, are also common in response to uncertainty, especially about the process and timeline for who gets the vaccine and when.

With that in mind, anxiety may come up around thoughts like “Will the vaccine fully protect me?” and “What if I experience side effects?” Thus, it's important that people seek reputable information from trusted sources like their physician, their local public health agency, and the CDC to ensure that they aren't letting a rush of emotion cloud their judgment and can make well-informed decisions about their health.

I'm really worried that I or vulnerable members of my household won't be able to get the vaccine. How do I cope with that stress?



Dr. Grasso: The antidote to stress caused by worry thoughts like these is to focus on what is within your control and getting as much accurate information as possible. For example, do you know where to get the latest information about vaccination distribution in your area? Have you signed up for notifications from your healthcare provider or local public health authority to ensure you're alerted as soon as the vaccine is available to you? Identifying and consulting the best sources for vaccine information will help ensure that you're up-to-date on new developments.

Be sure to look at reputable news sources about vaccine distribution to date; although there have been problems with the rollout, the latest news suggests that states are vaccinating in much larger numbers than before, which can serve as a reminder that worry thoughts can lead us astray. In the meantime, ensure you're doing what you can to protect yourself and others in your household by taking all of the best public health precautions, including good hand hygiene, proper mask wearing, and social distancing.

I feel like I can't plan my life until I get the vaccine. How do I cope with the stress and uncertainty of waiting?



Dr. Grasso: It's difficult to plan too far out into the future under so much uncertainty, which is why it can be helpful to stick to planning in the nearer-term instead. Try planning in terms of weeks, rather than months, whenever possible. But when long-term decisions have to be made, use the best information you have available to you and aim for plans that would allow you some flexibility in case circumstances or situations change. For example, if you're booking travel several months out, make sure to book as much of your trip as possible under refundable terms.

Also remind yourself of your ability to handle life's curveballs. Much of our stress comes from underestimating our own ability to cope with a potential disappointment or setback. In reality, we are often much more resilient and adaptable than we give ourselves credit for. To help reduce future-oriented stress, consider all of your own personal qualities—as well as your support system and external resources—that can help you deal with an expected change in plans.

I feel a lot of anxiety around socializing and interacting with people. I'm worried that when things go back to normal, I'll be socially incompetent. How do I cope with that?



Dr. Grasso: It's true that many of us may be a little rusty at socializing in person, but there's comfort in remembering that that's a common phenomenon. Many people are feeling the same way you are, so consider being upfront about it. By openly acknowledging the challenges of non-virtual interaction, you are offering up a powerful icebreaker when reconnecting in person with friends and family, and creating an opportunity to have a conversation that helps people be a little vulnerable, which promotes closeness in relationships. Don't avoid the discomfort—name it and talk through it with people you trust. You'll likely find that most people can relate to what you're feeling.

How do I help my loved ones through their anxiety and fear of getting the vaccine?



Dr. Grasso: People want to feel seen and heard, so disarm the person you're talking with by being curious about why they are feeling anxious or fearful. Ask open-ended questions that signal your genuine interest in understanding their perspective. As they share their fears and anxieties, reflect what you're hearing to show that you're listening attentively and that their emotions make sense, with statements such as "Sounds like you're feeling (their stated emotion) given (their stated situation), which makes sense to me." You don't have to agree with their perspective to be able to relate to what they're feeling and why. Ultimately, people want to know they're not unusual or "wrong" for having their feelings and that they're not being judged.

That being said, if you think your loved one could consider the vaccine from a less worrisome and more factually accurate perspective, first ask for permission to share your point of view and what you've learned. Tone is especially important when it comes to changing hearts and minds. Offer up reputable facts that may be reassuring to them but be sure to also provide stories or anecdotes, such as stories of people who were vaccinated without significant side effects, that make the facts feel real and personal. Remember that we usually craft our beliefs based on emotion, not cold, hard data, so cultivating a sense of empathy, openness, and curiosity in conversation is more likely to successfully get your point across than bombarding someone with data.

I'm afraid to get the vaccine, but I want to do it. How do I cope with that fear?



Dr. Grasso: First, reassure yourself that this is a perfectly normal feeling to have. Shaming or judging ourselves for how we feel creates an unnecessary struggle with our emotions. Then, be curious about what you're feeling and why. What are you fearful of? What makes you anxious about the vaccine? Uncovering the source of your anxiety and fear may help point you toward topics that you need to learn more about from trusted sources.

For example, if your fear revolves around possible side effects, talking with your physician might be the best remedy. If your anxiety is about the effectiveness of the vaccine, consult the CDC or government health agencies that will have the most accurate information about what level of protection the vaccine can offer. In addition to seeking reputable information, you can counter your anxiety by noticing and challenging some of your thoughts about the vaccine.

Do your fears arise from your own worst-case scenarios? Instead of allowing yourself to run away with those fears, scrutinize them. Are these accurate thoughts? Helpful thoughts? In times of anxiety, they're often not, so try redirecting your attention toward the best available factual information about the vaccine and toward your ultimate motivators: staying healthy and protecting others from exposure to the virus.

How do I manage media fatigue and misinformation around the vaccine?



Dr. Kocher: The most up-to-date and reliable information can be found on the CDC website. Many people can also get excellent and personalized information from their primary care doctors.



Dr. Grasso: Give yourself permission to take a news and social media break if you notice that uncomfortable emotions arise in the aftermath of consuming media, especially if you ultimately don't reap any benefits such as gaining a healthier perspective or being able to plan or problem-solve more effectively. Stick to reputable sources like the CDC, instead, to protect against media fatigue.