

Finding uncreased clothes, hunting down a parking space and, oh, the agony of wearing heels again, this writer wasn't looking forward to her return to the office – it's a classic case of...

LOCKHOLM SYNDROME

by Lisa Brady

IWAKE up, my stomach churning. It takes me a minute to realise the source of my unease. Had I had a stress dream? You know the type, you're either sitting your Leaving Cert and you haven't studied, or you're wandering around your office starkers, trying to hide your bits and bobs and maintain a professional air at all times.

The latter is actually one of the most common workplace anxiety dreams, I'll have you know – but what was causing me to wake up in a cold sweat was even worse.

It was the fact that today was the day I was to return to my office, having worked remotely since March 2020.

Contrary to the aforementioned nightmare, I was going to actually wear clothes, but this realisation

had also caused me great distress.

The night before, I gingerly opened my wardrobe – half

expecting a bat to fly out, it's been that long – and stared at what seemed like an endless option of fussy dresses that needed belts and tops that also required ironing (and bras) and... what were these spikes on the end of my shoes that weren't my trainers?

That was just the start of my 1,500 micro-decisions and tasks to be tackled before exiting the safety of my home office and going back to, well, I wasn't quite sure what.

In addition to the sea change of working life, courtesy of the pandemic, our company has also moved offices recently, so I felt my anxiety double at the thought of not knowing where I was going to park. Or sit (I had to use an app to book a desk, which obviously I hadn't a clue about), or eat, or locate the bathroom... argh!

Also, I'm feeling a little cross at the entire going-back-to-normal scenario. I'd just come to terms with living abnormally and somewhat anti-socially, and now all of a sudden we have to go back to commutes and conversations?

We have to un-hermit ourselves

and make actual plans in an actual diary that might actually happen, and taxi children to their various play dates and lessons, while looking presentable?

I'd become nicely institutionalised, happy in my uniform of black leggings and vest tops, holed away in my small home office, thanks all the same.

My rumination of doom is interrupted by a loud, insistent meow. Oh Violet, my sweet little lockdown cat. She doesn't give two hoots about me but I adore the beautiful thankless creature. It would be our first time away from each other.

The children are at school, the dogs have each other, but that poor abandoned cat...

I try to pick her up to comfort her at the distressing news that mummy has to go to the office, and in her haste to escape my clutches she gives me a large angry scratch.

I want to cry. I'm feeling more than a little overwhelmed. And apparently, I'm not alone in my reluctance to leave my simple life

and return to those heady post-pandemic days. A recent US survey showed that almost 40% of adults would consider quitting their job if



they had to go back to the office full-time. We have seen the benefits working from home can bring – more flexibility, a better life/work balance, more family time and more positive mental health.

It just so happens that there's an online course specifically to target the concerns of re-joining society.

Life coaches Kathleen Fanning and Niall Heenan – creators of Revive, Renew and Restart, which was initially established to support people during lockdown – have now created a second six-week course to support people adapting to the impact of the pandemic as everything opens up again.

'It comes as no surprise that many of us are experiencing a range of emotions and expectation regarding our next steps,' said Kathleen, as I joined herself and Niall over Zoom from our respective offices (I finally made it into the new office in one piece, although my feet are killing me from a long walk in ill-chosen boots).

I've also managed to locate my desk and get my computer working, find a bathroom and catch up with some work pals that I haven't seen in over a year.

Contrary to fearing I'd lost the power to converse, it turns out that I've got a dose of verbal diarrhoea – nobody else can get a word in edgeways.

That said, my nerves are jarred. Even though I find myself belly-laughing with my work wives, I'm unsure as to how I feel about any of it, so it's fierce handy that I've organised this little crash course in the whole re-emerging into society business with Kathleen and Niall on my big return.

'It's weird,' I told them from the boardroom (when I eventually find it). Kathleen nodded her head in agreement.

'It's like going back to school, sharing an office again, and people have reassessed their values,' she said.

Niall concurred: 'People found safety in their homes during lockdown, and now they struggle with leaving them.'

Yes! That's exactly it – Lockholm Syndrome! I've fallen in love with my own self-imposed captivity.

But thankfully, as the pair explained, there are ways to move

forward healthily. 'There's life lessons that you've learnt over lockdown. People have become more self-aware, they have prioritised the important stuff,' said Niall.

He asked me to share what, perhaps, I learnt about myself over the past year.

'I've learned I actually like my own company,' I said. 'I've actually enjoyed not having the pressure of certain expectations, feeling like I should be in a million places at once.'

And, of course, there's all that extra time I've spent with my family. My heart twinges a little at the thought of my two little girls (who were doing my head in at 6.30

this morning). I wanted to get home on time to put them to bed, I realised. I hadn't missed a night of that precious ritual for the last

18 months. 'It's helpful to remember your priorities, develop coping strategies for stress and reframe your thinking when re-joining your office,' said Kathleen.

'Instead of bemoaning the idea of the commute and being stuck in traffic, change your approach to it. Think instead of the solitude you have when travelling, enjoy the walk to the office, the coffee you get en route, that kind of thing.'

It's true, I did actually enjoy listening to a podcast in my car, gathering my thoughts in comfort – this can be difficult to do at home with young children – and although my trot from car to office was not exactly a walk in the park, more a limp, I can bring trainers next time and enjoy it.

But what about the boundaries? They are already encroaching, I tell

them, as my competitive streak/mum guilt is reactivated. I'm tempted to enrol the girls in every activity known to man, and plan a gazillion things to do with family and friends. How do I strike a balance without getting caught in the rat race once more?

'Your table was cleared of all of this life clutter during lockdown. There was actually a freedom to that,' said Kathleen.

'Now you have a choice – do you put everything back and have all this mess, or do you keep things clear and manageable?'

'You have to ask yourself: "Do I really need or want this on my

table, or is it because I'm expected to put it there?"'

Sometimes I feel like there's not enough time in my day, I fluster, panicking already about how work commutes will eat into our newly arranged family lives.

A good tip if you're feeling bogged down is to assess your daily habits, said Kathleen.

What are the things that you are you doing that are useful and helping you make the most of each day and what are the things that

are getting in your way? 'Each evening, make a note of the most important things that you need to do tomorrow and number them in importance.'

'The next day do the most important thing on that list and then work through it, giving each item a chunk of time,' she said.

Niall also encouraged me to consider how I developed resilience in the lockdown days. Well, I swam in the sea, I went for long walks with the dogs, tried meditation... oh, and I learned how to be an online cardio dance instructor! That sweated off some stress.

'There you go – you've developed new coping mechanisms,' he said.

I agree – however, I feel grapevining around the office may well be a step too far. 'Like so many people, you've embraced a more introverted style. We live in a socially extroverted world and I think a lot of people have found it's nice not to be always on,' he said.

'I think to avoid going down that slippery slope of stress, you have to manage that focus on what is good and important to you. Let go of comparison. Maintain a work/life balance going forward, be grateful for the good things in your life and make them your priority.'

I've actually got the best of both worlds, I realised, as I've the option of splitting my working hours between home and the office.

'There's a lot of women with young children enrolling in this course. The pandemic has given them pause for thought, and they are looking at maybe a change in career, or whatever it is to create the future they actually want,' said Kathleen.

'We really zone in on self-care, time management, goal setting and prioritising the most important and joyful areas of life.'



Taking breaks, becoming mindful of a task in hand and concentrating on breathing are all tools we can turn to if there's a feeling of overwhelm in an office environment, said Niall.

Oh, and there's one other thing you can do too, if you've access to a

quiet, private space. I close my eyes, hoping nobody is watching me through the floor-to ceiling glass boardroom panels, and focus on Niall's voice as he guides me through a visualisation exercise.

'Focus on your breathing... concentrate on the things you value, hold them close to you... then imagine you are an older you, looking at this person in the office, holding those values... Do you still value them? Are they the most important things in your life?

That's where your priorities are, right there. That's your joy. That's what matters.'

As I gazed at my older self looking at my younger self, in my boardroom office where onlookers might think I've fallen asleep in my chair, clarity comes to me.

It was like I knew what I had to do – and it didn't involve sweating the small stuff.

Yes it's a whole new world, and not only do I think I'm ready, I might even be looking forward to it. Next time though, I'm bringing my trainers.

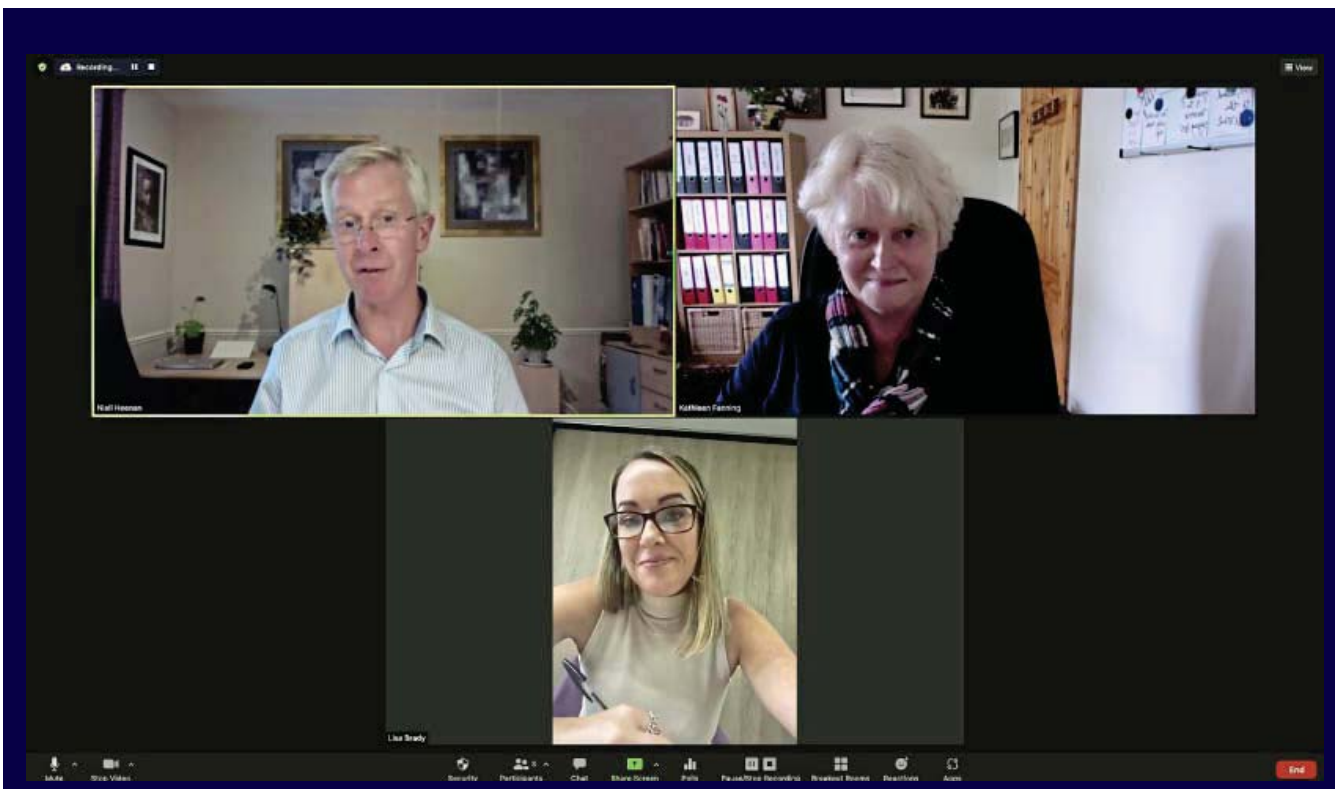
■ *REVIVE, Renew and Restart 2 begins Monday, September 27. To book, go to eventbrite.ie. Further course details available from kathleen@invest-in-yourself.ie or info@niallheenan.ie*

**'Concentrate
on the things
you value'**

**'Enjoy the walk
to the office, the
coffee you get'
It feels like
going back to
school again**

**I'd just come to
terms with living
abnormally**





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Return to normality: Lisa getting ready for the office. Left, on the Zoom call with Niall and Kathleen. Right, Lisa's two daughters going off to school



