Can the "New Normal" Ever Go Back to the Old One?

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If you're looking for a window on the new normal, it may very well be made of plexiglass. Russ Miller, who manages TAP Plastics in San Leandro, California, says business is booming. "It's absolutely insanely busy. In 40 years of doing this, I've never seen anything like this."

Miller said that as soon as the number of COVID-19 cases exploded, so did sales of the transparent acrylic barriers.

"The first customers were the large grocery stores," he said. "Plastic sheets for between the customer and the cashier."

Already plexiglass barriers are popping up in reception areas, office cafeterias, and hair and nail salons, which raises the question: As we all begin to emerge from our pandemic isolation, will we find ourselves still separated from each other?

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Adam Alter, a psychology professor at New York University's Stern School of Business, said, "Behaviors change, but they always change for shorter periods than we anticipate or than a lot of people expect."

He points out that the phrase "the new normal" was much used during the last two decades, notably after the 2008 financial crisis. "People said, you know, 'This is the new normal. You're gonna have to be much more careful about your spending.' It was also about saying to consumers, 'Banks and other institutions will be forced to behave better in the future. And so with luck we'll avert future crises like this one.'"

But fewer than ten years later, the government loosened the major financial protections. Change didn't last.

Alter said, "I think we'll see the same thing after the pandemic as well. I think when you're in the midst of an event it's concrete, it's very present, it's all that surrounds you, and it takes up your whole attentional field. But I think as it passes, the vast majority of our behaviors will return to the way they were."

But some changes will stick. Can we even remember what it was like to fly before 9/11?

"We instituted a whole lot of different policies," Alter said. "The way we traveled changed, the way we entered buildings changed. Security in general was much tighter in every respect."

Not that there hasn't been a lot of grumbling about the long lines and privacy intrusions. Alter said many Americans are less welcoming of new norms that feel imposed: "A lot of people just say, 'You know what? I've got plenty of freedom. I'm good.' There are other people in the population who, I think, are more naturally resistant to being told pretty much anything. You could say, 'Don't do this thing that will protect thousands of people,' or, 'Don't do this thing that will keep you safe,' and they say, 'Don't tell *me* what to do! That's not something I'm willing to accept.'"

Now, it's not that humans aren't capable of change over relatively short periods of time. Think about this: twenty years ago almost no one had a smartphone. And now, according to Alter, "Seventy-five percent of American adults say they can reach their phones without moving their feet 24 hours a day – which means their phones are either under their pillows or on their nightstand table, [or] they're in their pockets."

On average, he said, Americans will spend *fifteen years of their lives* looking at their smartphones.

Rocca said, "Had Steve Jobs strode out onto the stage with the first iPhone and said, 'All of you will buy this device and start using it now,' it probably would not have worked out so well?"

"It would not," Alter said. "If the government had said, for example, 'Everyone is mandated to buy a device,' the attitudes would have been very, very, very different."

Whatever the new normal ends up looking like, Alter said some people may actually begin pining for lockdown life.

"And as soon as you're being forced to move around again, I think we'll start to stay, 'Remember when we could just sit on the couch?'"

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