‘Cave Syndrome’ Keeps the Vaccinated in Social Isolation

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After being diagnosed with COVID in November 2020, Andrea King Collier doubted the antibodies that she had developed in response to the illness would protect her from a second infection and was determined to be first in, or near the front of, the line for a vaccine. The Flint, Mich., resident registered at every vaccine distribution site she could find and never stopped looking for a way to receive shots early. By February 21 Collier had received her second dose of the Pfizer vaccine. But when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention gave the green light for vaccinated people to resume prepandemic activities such as gathering indoors without masks on March 8, she did not experience the sense of freedom she had imagined. If anything, she became more fearful of infection. She has yet to eat in a restaurant or see anyone beyond her pandemic bubble. Formerly an avid traveler, Collier says she cannot imagine getting on an airplane again in the foreseeable future.

After a year in isolation, many people who have developed an intimate understanding of what it means to socially isolate are afraid to return to their former lives despite being fully vaccinated. There is even a name for their experience: the clinical sounding “cave syndrome.”

Emerging into the light after a year locked inside is proving to be a difficult transition for some people. Jacqueline Gollan, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University, says adjusting to the new normal, whatever it may be, is going to take time. “The pandemic-related changes created a lot of fear and anxiety because of the risk of illness and death, along with the repercussions in many areas of life,” she says. “Even though a person may be vaccinated, they still may find it difficult to let go of that fear because they’re overestimating the risk and probability.”