

# How Our Brains Numb Us To Covid-19's Risks — and What We Can Do About It

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Back in March, going just about anywhere felt like entering a combat zone. As covid-19 case counts rose across the country, I quaked at the prospect of going to the grocery store. I donned my mask and tried not to inhale as I threaded through the aisles, dousing myself with sanitizer as soon as I got out.

But as the pandemic stretched into summer, my vigilance began to flag. Trips to the grocery store started to seem routine again rather than cause for panic. In June, I signed my oldest son up for summer camp — albeit one with campers confined to small groups. And I hope to send both my kids back to the classroom when school officially reopens.

I often suspect, though, that I'm getting too blasé about the ongoing threat from covid-19, the disease caused by the novel [coronavirus](#). And I know I'm not alone. Thousands of us are less afraid than we were at the pandemic's outset, even though in many parts of the country mounting case counts have increased the danger of getting the virus. We're swarming the beaches and boardwalks, often without masks. We're crowding into restaurants we haven't visited for months. And some of us are gathering in large groups for raucous parties — even in covid-19 hot spots such as Miami, Houston and [northern Georgia](#).

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As the pandemic drags on, people are unknowingly performing a kind of exposure therapy on themselves, said University of Oregon psychologist Paul Slovic, author of [“The Perception of Risk”](#) — and the results can be deadly.

Fear of covid-19 initially kept many people hunkering down inside their homes and glued to their screens to order food and needed supplies. Then, with trepidation, they headed out to buy groceries. The next time they left home, they felt bolder. Soon, like me, they were lining up at reopened stores for nonessential shopping trips, setting up hair appointments and seeing friends from a distance.

“You have an experience and the experience is benign. It feels okay and comfortable. It's familiar. Then you do it again,” Slovic said. “If you don't see anything immediately bad happening, your concerns get deconditioned.” And according to University of Washington environmental policy professor Ann Bostrom, whose research focuses on risk perception, we have a human tendency to grow numb to mounting numbers of deaths and diagnoses.

The end result of all this desensitizing is a kind of overriding heedlessness decoupled from evidence — the anti-mask movements, the beach gatherings, the overflowing dance parties. And experts say this backsliding is predictable — in the face of what feels a threat.

What's more, the way we assess cost and reward in this pandemic discourages us from taking actions that keep the virus in check, Slovic said. One of the best ways to reinforce a certain behavior is to make sure that behavior is rewarded and that deviations from it are punished (or ignored). But when it comes to lifesaving behaviors such as mask-wearing or staying home from parties, this reward-punishment calculus gets turned on its head.

With parties, when you do the right thing and stay home, "you feel an immediate cost: You're not able to be with your friends," Slovic said. He added that while there is an upside to this decision — helping to stop the spread of the virus — it feels distant. "The benefit is invisible, but the costs are very tangible."

By contrast, Slovic said, when you flout guidelines about wearing masks or avoiding gatherings, you get an immediate reward: You rejoice at not having to breathe through fabric, or you enjoy celebrating a close friend's birthday in person.

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