

Safetyism Isn't the Problem

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As America debates when and how to reopen, those concerned about the side effects of the lockdown have begun to use the word "[safetyism](#)" to characterize what they consider extreme social-distancing measures.

Safetyism, a term first used in the book "The Coddling of the American Mind," by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, denotes a moral culture in which people are unwilling to make trade-offs demanded by other practical and moral concerns. Rather than seeing safety as one concern among many, it becomes a sacred value.

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Individuals and cultures differ in the extent to which they're willing to tolerate risk, so disagreements about safety are inevitable, whether deciding how to protect people from car accidents, crime or Covid-19. But everyone tolerates *some* risk. And there is some truth to the way we characterize left and right during this crisis: As polls demonstrate, the right is [slightly more concerned](#) about lockdowns being lifted too slowly and the left is vastly more concerned about lifting lockdowns too quickly.

The onslaught of social and news media makes it easy to make general assumptions about each side. When bombarded daily with statements from Governor Cuomo, the lockdown position seems like safetyism: an obsession with avoiding contact with the virus at all costs, even if it means national suicide. Similarly, when those on the left hear only from people on the right who think the virus is either a bad flu or a [hoax](#), the open-up position can look like a reactionary ideology of anti-safetyism: an obsession with freedom at all costs, even if it means sacrificing our grandparents' lives.

But the left is also composed of people who argue for tolerating some risk, even as they suggest a slower reopening than the right would like. And the right is also composed of people who object to mandated lockdowns but [accept](#) indoor mask-wearing requirements and expect citizens to take voluntary precautions not only to protect themselves, but to protect the most vulnerable. And a [vast majority of Americans](#) across both sides of the aisle say, "We're all in it together."

When we react to our opposition's most extreme views, however, and interact only with those who think like we do, not only do we fail to see the value in our opposition's perspective, but our own views tend to become more [polarized and extreme](#). In other words, the more each side reacts to the most extreme version of the other side, the more each side becomes like the extreme version the other side rails against.

The mentality of safetyism adopted by some lockdown proponents makes it difficult to alter course,

even when doing so might save lives. For example, as we learn [more about the virus](#), we're beginning to understand that the likelihood of transmission outdoors is very low. But instead of encouraging people to spend time outside, we're seeing [beach](#) and [lakefront](#) closings and new mandates requiring people to [wear masks outdoors](#) at all times, even when social distancing.

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