

What Our Post-Pandemic Behavior Might Look Like

June 01, 2020

There was a time in the not-too-distant past when it wasn't widely understood that germs could pass from person to person. Before the late 1800s, habits like sharing cups with strangers and spitting in public even amidst crowds weren't considered unsanitary. Then a tuberculosis outbreak came, and our behavior changed — in some ways irrevocably and in some ways temporarily.

What will coronavirus do to our societal norms and relationships? We only have inklings thus far: Changed social expectations of face masks could be one, a new aversion to face-touching may be another. [Images of crowds gathered during Memorial Day](#) weekend may suggest that for some people, few social-distancing norms will stick. Still, past epidemics, disasters, and instances of social isolation have demonstrated how these societal disruptions can alter our behavior for years to come. They've also demonstrated time and again that humans are fundamentally resilient, making adjustments in the short-term but also falling back into old habits once an acute risk has passed.

Take the example of shaking hands. If it were up to Anthony Fauci, we [might never shake hands again](#). But history suggests that handshakes, fraught with so much societal weight, come and go with waves of public health scares.

While there are no exact corollaries to our current cocktail of germs and social isolation — not even the [1918 influenza pandemic](#) — understanding past shifts can help us prepare for change now.

...

Will social isolation change us?

In a world that frequently experiences large-scale disasters like extreme storms, mass violence, and economic downturns, dealing with collective trauma is not an unfamiliar challenge. But in the case of coronavirus, that trauma can't be separated from social isolation. Already, a third of Americans reported experiencing high levels of psychological distress during this pandemic, including more than half of people who described their financial situation as poor, [according to the Pew Research Center](#).

In times like these, our instinct is to find comfort in our networks of friends and family, and in our community. Research by psychology professor Roxane Cohen Silver at the University of California, Irvine, has looked at how societies reacted to traumatic situations and found that communities became closer as people sought out the company of their loved ones and their neighbors. After the 9/11 attacks, people were more likely to seek greater meaning through engagement in religious and political activities that helped boost their well-being. And inside a small Israeli town that endured seven years of constant bombing, communities that got together in tight-knit groups and supported one another through sharing of resources did best in coping with attacks, Silver said.

The cruel irony is that the infectious nature of the coronavirus has forced billions of people across the globe to stay home and cope, or even grieve, alone. That may come with its own set of consequences, which could be especially pronounced among those who have had to be put in forced isolation.

In one [study](#), researchers found at the end of a nine-day quarantine during SARS in Taiwan, health care workers (who tested negative for the disease) were more likely than their non-quarantined colleagues to develop symptoms of stress disorders, like exhaustion, irritability, insomnia, and poor concentration. “That traumatic stress can linger even after the episode is over,” says Kang at the Singapore Institute of Mental Health.

And in a small [qualitative study](#) in Toronto, which surveyed 21 people who were quarantined during the SARS outbreak, some participants described long-term behavioral changes years after it ended: continued vigilant hand washing, for example, and crowd avoidance. Others said that they struggled to reestablish relationships because of the stigma they encountered, and that a “return to normalcy” was delayed by several months.

But it’s worth noting that these studies focus on specific groups of people who endure more extreme forms of isolation than most of the population is currently experiencing under social distancing measures. “The current situation is new, and many people are dealing with some degree of distress and anxiety, but most people are able to bounce back,” said Taylor. “Life might not be a return to what it was before, but most people are able to deal with stresses like this.”

There’s one thing that’s particularly different about our current condition of social isolation, adds Taylor: the internet. Research is limited on that front in the study of epidemics given the relatively recent rise of those technologies — but we can look to their effects on space travelers.

“These are people who are isolated for four to six months in space, and they are under the potential dangers of space and can’t go outside and take a walk easily,” says Nick Kanas, a psychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco, and author of the book “Humans in Space.” He spent 15 years as the principal investigator of various of NASA-funded research on the psychological hurdles of space travelers.

In one study, he looked for signs in space of what isolated Antarctic researchers call the “third quarter phenomenon” — a period of increased stress and interpersonal tension midway through a mission as explorers acknowledge that they must endure the other half before returning home.

“We did not find evidence of third quarter phenomenon in our study of the 30 astronauts and cosmonauts,” Kanas said. “Some got depressed in the third quarter and some got depressed during the first quarter as they were getting acclimated, so there was no consistent effect.” He suggests that may be because unlike the Antarctic researchers who are isolated in an area with almost no telecommunication access, space explorers are able to connect 24/7 with their families through video calls on the International Space Station. (It probably also helps that the crew goes through extensive training beforehand and has support staff who provide brain-stimulation activities as needed.)

That’s not unlike many who are currently isolating at home and experiencing quarantine fatigue. Zoom calls and social apps [have virtually connected many](#) to the outside world. Yet the reality is that that

connection can't fully replace physical touch. When the pandemic eases, it's possible our longing for social interaction in the physical space will have us running to friends and family, but stopping short of jumping back into crowded areas as we remain hyper-vigilant about the threat of the coronavirus.

Adjusting to a new normal

...

Silver and her team are also in the midst of studying Covid-19, looking at the role of media and constant news consumption in amplifying the symptoms of stress. "We're still in the eye of the storm and we're still anticipating what might happen," she said. "We don't know how long this is going to last, and we don't know how bad it's going to get."

But she predicts that over time, as new public health measures get phased in, people will gradually adjust to a new normal so that they can leave their homes feeling safe again. (Although the current partisan divides in the U.S. and the [politicization of science](#) is expected to muddle the transition.) That's what happened after 9/11 completely [transformed the way people fly](#). First people accepted that knives were no longer allowed on flights, then as new threats emerged, travelers agreed to take off their shoes during security screenings and tolerated the ban on water bottles.

"I do not believe we will ever go back to where we were on January 1, 2020," Silver said. "But as we get further and further from that time, fewer people may remember how it was before."