

## As the Pandemic Drags On, Americans Struggle for New Balance

As offices, restaurants and schools fill up, people are adjusting expectations and habits in another moment of deep uncertainty.



By Roni Caryn Rabin

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Jordi Salomon put the pandemic in the rearview mirror long ago. Her two little boys are back at school, where there has been no mask requirement since the spring. They attend birthday parties and theme parks, visit the library and play with friends.

Ms. Salomon, 35, of Orange County, Calif., makes sure the family eats well and gets outdoors as much as possible, and she is careful to respect the wishes of friends and relatives who are comfortable meeting only in masks.

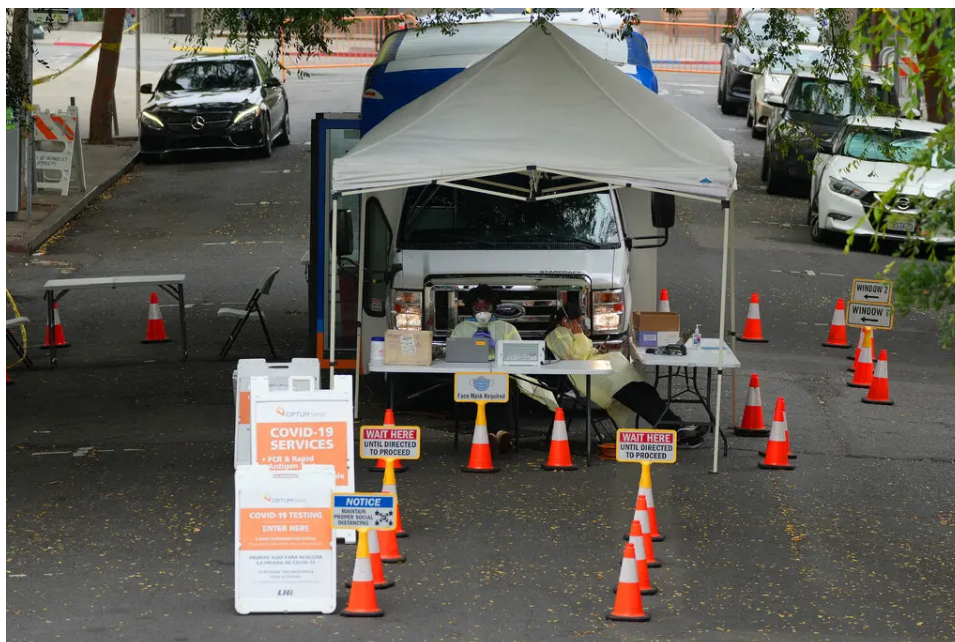
“But I can’t live in fear,” she said. “My kids are only kids once. There is so much to do and experience in that magical time.”

For Americans like Ms. Salomon, life has in many ways returned to something like the Before Times. Restaurants are packed, and cultural performances sold out. Children are sitting in schools, and workers are trickling back into offices. Masks are no longer required in public, even in New York City’s subways.

The summer travel season was a blockbuster. Even cruise ships — derided as floating Petri dishes early in the pandemic — were filling up with eager passengers.

Most Americans want to get back to normalcy and are unwilling to let Covid rule their lives any longer, Dr. Ashish Jha, the White House Covid response coordinator, said in an interview. “Those two sets of goals are achievable,” Dr. Jha said, so long as Americans keep getting vaccinated, test when necessary and wear masks in crowded public settings.

“We shouldn’t act like it’s 2019,” he added, “but we also should not act like it’s 2020.”



A mobile testing clinic in Berkeley, Calif., earlier this year. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

But the coronavirus has not gone away. While deaths have plummeted since the beginning of the year, about 315 Americans are still dying of Covid on the average day. This year's toll has so far exceeded 219,000.

More than 27,000 Americans with Covid are in hospitals on any given day, and an uncertain number face lingering complications, so-called long Covid. Declines in test positivity and hospitalization are flattening, hinting at a possible reversal.

Roughly half of Americans eligible for boosters have not gotten them, and just 10 percent have gotten the most up-to-date bivalent booster. Experts are warning that waning immunity and the arrival of new subvariants may lead to another surge of cases and hospitalizations.

"The pandemic is over — we still have a problem with Covid-19," President Biden recently said. That is the needle that Americans are threading right now, and it makes for a strange national disequilibrium. On any given day, half the country appears to be relieved that the worst seems to be over, while the other half seems gripped by the persistent fear that the nation may never really be free of the virus.

Most Americans are eating out again, visiting friends and returning to offices, according to recent surveys by Axios-Ipsos. Only 5 percent of respondents said they considered those activities to be high risk.

But fewer than one-quarter of them thought there was no risk at all. Close to half said they had returned to their pre-Covid lives — even as two-thirds said they believed the pandemic was not over.

"It's a weird moment we're in, and a confusing one, I think, for a lot of people," said Debra Caplan, an associate professor of theater at Baruch College in New York, who added that she was mystified by what she termed society's "collective shrug."



A crowded security checkpoint with spotty mask compliance at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport this year. Elijah Nouvelage/Reuters

Recently, one of her children was infected with the virus just a few weeks before sleepaway camp was to begin. The camp required a negative test result at least 24 hours before arrival, and the Caplan family went to great lengths to prevent additional infections at home.

They were all relieved when the child tested negative on time. “But after all this, we go to the airport to drop them off, and no one, no one, is wearing a mask,” Dr. Caplan said. “Here we are killing ourselves to make it so my kid can go to camp, and yet everyone is, ‘This is over, right?’”

In Illinois, Rachel Hoopsick drops her two children at preschool in the morning, even though she worries their vaccinations aren’t a perfect shield against the coronavirus and one of them is medically vulnerable.

Then Dr. Hoopsick, an assistant professor of kinesiology and community health, heads to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where she teaches a large class (including many unmasked students) about public health measures (like masks) that can curb the spread of infectious disease.

Life feels like an exercise in double-think, she said. “To participate in society right now,” she said, “you have to either be blissfully unaware or to dissociate and carry on as if there isn’t a pandemic.”

On a sunny weekend day at his maple syrup and candy stand at a highway rest stop in upstate New York, Chris Smith, 67, donned a mask whenever customers wearing masks approached.

But he stopped worrying about his own health long ago. Medical science had gotten the better of the coronavirus, he said, comparing it to influenza — “here forever,” but not as dangerous as it was before vaccines and treatments arrived.

“Now I figure if I do get it, they at least have an idea how to save me,” Mr. Smith, of White Creek, N.Y., said.

But many residents of Queens, the pandemic’s epicenter in March 2020, said in interviews that they still recalled the endless sirens as ambulances streaked through the streets.

Ducking into the post office or bagel store, or buying berries from a street vendor, many patted their back pockets, indicating they had a mask with them, even if they weren’t wearing it.

“I don’t think people have forgotten the refrigerated trucks,” said Yohuru Williams, 51, a former New Yorker, referring to the mobile morgues parked outside hospitals as bodies piled up at the height of the pandemic.

But in Minneapolis, where Mr. Williams lives now, he said that “the momentum to take precautions is waning.”

On a recent flight, he said, “only one other person on the plane had a mask on.”

Lizabeth Wright, a retired veterinarian who splits her time between Baton Rouge, La., and Austin, Texas, is vaccinated and up-to-date on boosters, and has resumed eating out and going to church.

But she’s still on the fence about traveling by plane and attending large social gatherings. She believes masking in public is an important precaution, but she is tired of it — and keeps forgetting her mask at home.

Ms. Wright has been more confident since vaccinations were available, and she is in good health. But she feels that’s no guarantee, saying: “I know young people have fallen very ill. It’s kind of a roll of the dice.”

Holding two contradictory ideas in mind simultaneously — the pandemic is over, we still have a problem with Covid — is intensely discomfiting, psychologists say. It is a form of cognitive dissonance, experienced when one’s behaviors or actions are at odds with the information or understanding they have.

People are driven to reduce the discord by reconciling conflicting thoughts and behaviors, but the process is not a conscious one, said Elliot Aronson, a professor emeritus of social psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

People who smoke despite the known risks, for example, may tell themselves that they plan to quit in five years, or that their health is otherwise excellent.





Differing attitudes to masking at a Circle Foods Grocery in New Orleans. Emily Kask for The New York Times

As people tire of Covid precautions, for example, “they try to convince themselves it’s OK not to wear a mask,” Dr. Aronson said. “We all know people who had light cases and recovered quickly, and then it does feel foolish to be worried about a light case.”

People also don’t like to stand out, he noted. We are uncomfortable wearing a mask into a work meeting or social gathering, only to discover no one else is wearing one. “It creates the illusion that maybe we missed something, like, ‘Maybe I didn’t read The Times this morning and maybe they declared the whole thing over,’” Dr. Aronson said.

He advises people who want to make more rational decisions to think about the thing they least want to think about — perhaps the more than 300 people still dying daily of Covid in the United States, or that many people who had a mild illness went on to develop long Covid, he said.

“If you want to do the rational thing, you want to force yourself to dredge that up,” Dr. Aronson said.

In this strange moment in the pandemic, Americans are forced to make sober judgments about health risks, but copious scientific research has shown that we have never been much good at it. We often fear the catastrophic risks that we cannot control and neglect the lesser risks that we can, and are swayed by the need for the immediate gratification that comes from pleasurable activities.

At the end of the day, different people will accept different levels of risk. Sarah Cotsen, who lives outside Portland, Me., threw a dinner party recently, the first she’d hosted since the pandemic started. Some guests RSVP’d immediately and said they weren’t worried about the virus, but others were apprehensive.

She promised dinner would be held outside, but on the day of the party, it started pouring. So Ms. Cotsen improvised, throwing open all the doors and windows to let the breeze waft through the house.

The hesitant guests gathered on a screened porch, while others mingled inside.

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