

My own pandemic experiences helped me understand people's mask anxieties today

Americans are adjusting to the pandemic's end differently. Let's respect that.

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A few weeks ago, I was walking with my husband in our D.C. neighborhood when a man approached from the opposite direction on a narrow sidewalk. It had been a few days since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that vaccinated people could walk outside without masks — a decision I welcomed. My two-week post-vaccination window had just ended, but I'd long felt safe outdoors, based on what I'd read about the low probability of outdoor coronavirus transmission. I'd kept wearing a mask outside as a social courtesy to my neighbors, who were still keeping them up whenever they left the house. But when the CDC changed its guidelines, I decided I'd stop wearing one while exercising outdoors.

As we came closer, the man on the sidewalk pulled up his mask. Then, he burst into a run. He sprinted past us, stopping only when he had made it down the block. I watched, feeling dumbstruck. It was the kind of behavior I might have expected in the early days of the pandemic, when we didn't understand how the virus spread and nearly every interaction with another person felt dangerous. Last spring, I walked furtively and fast, sometimes stepping into the bike lane to avoid strangers as they strolled by. But now, more than 15 months into the pandemic? He may have been unvaccinated, or maybe he had other health conditions that put him in danger, but the risk of passing me briefly on the sidewalk was clearly low. I felt bad to have caused him fear, but it also struck me as a little unreasonable.

By this point, it feels like we've debated mask-wearing to death. When the pandemic was at its worst and most frightening, the argument was political: a muffled parody of the old philosophical contest between civic virtue ("wear them to protect others!") and individual freedom ("don't tell me what to do!"). Then, a few weeks ago, several writers marshaled the evidence to suggest that the best available science made clear that wearing masks outside was largely unnecessary after vaccination. That sparked backlash from angry people who protested that not everyone was vaccinated, that some were immunocompromised, and that the CDC had been wrong about the virus before and might be wrong again.

As someone who's fully vaccinated, I'm no longer worried about getting sick — or passing the virus on to others. But I'm still inclined to show compassion to that man on the sidewalk, despite my initial surprise, and even if I can't totally understand his fear.

This pandemic has done weird things to the way our brains process and approach danger, sparking reactions that may not make sense from outside. I know that from experience.

My run-in with pandemic-related panic was triggered by one of the most mundane elements of lockdown life: Zoom meetings. Last summer, while on a work call, I was speaking to a group of colleagues when I felt my throat suddenly close. My heart started racing so fast, I worried I was having some sort of medical event. I couldn't focus. I tried to recover as best I could, but I was deeply shaken by what had occurred. I was a professional in my 30s, who'd relied on daily Zoom calls with co-workers on the other side of the country for more than two years. Now I was being undone by a simple videoconference.

Feeling ashamed was not, it turns out, a recipe for making it better. To the contrary, the fear of losing control of my body made me lose control of my body. Soon it was not just Zoom calls that sent my heart rate soaring but certain phone calls, too. I felt unable to perform the basic functions of my job. But I was also unwilling to capitulate to my panic attacks, so I said yes to every call and every Zoom and suffered through all of them, hating the performance of professionalism and normalcy. I read articles about Zoom fatigue, and about the difficulty of having to look at your own face for hours on end, but nothing seemed to capture the specific distress I was feeling.

In the absence of external answers, I was forced to interrogate my own experiences. I'd spent much of the year trying to be strong for family and friends. After all, I was one of the lucky ones: able to work from home and privileged not to have gotten sick amid so much devastation across the world. Now I had to acknowledge that I was not doing as well as I thought. I was apart from my husband, who was overseas for work, weathering the lockdown alone. A job I loved was coming to an end, in ways that were distressing and painful. I was still walking around pretending like things were mostly fine. In the absence of my recognition of the larger stressors I was experiencing, my body now seemed to be screaming at me: *You are not okay!*

I couldn't help thinking about those experiences when I considered the man who ran past me on the street. I have no idea why he did it. The possible reasons are countless. And while it might be tempting to dismiss his behavior as irrational or anti-scientific, I know all too well that our minds have many ways of helping us manage and make sense of the ongoing awfulness of our collective situation. As Ed Yong writes in the Atlantic: "For some people, taking off a mask will mean just exposing the bottom half of their face. But for others, it signifies that they must reevaluate their understanding of risk and danger yet again, with fewer emotional reserves at hand." Masking up and avoiding people may not be strictly necessary in all circumstances, but such behaviors can still play a role in the lives of those who continue to practice them. They're reminders that safety and self-care can have many meanings, even when things objectively seem like they're getting better.

I am mostly better now, thanks to the slow return to something like normalcy, a good therapist and prescription meds for the occasional times when my body still doesn't

want to cooperate. That doesn't change how scary and painful it was. I keep thinking about a tweet someone wrote last year, which I can no longer find, about how our experiences with the horror of the pandemic will continue to bubble up for the next few years in unexpected ways, like thousands of little alarm clocks all going off at different times. Those responses will manifest in different ways in each of us, and with varying degrees of severity. The least we can do is to recognize that these choices — when and where to wear masks, what levels of social closeness we feel comfortable with — are, like so many decisions we make, informed by internal calculations that may be just as opaque to us as they are to others. And that's okay. We don't need to understand someone's behavior to respect it. A person's response to this stressful period can be a mystery — even, as my case shows, to the person experiencing it. That's something that all of us would do well to remember — the maskers, and anti-maskers, and everyone in between.

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