

How 'caution fatigue' may slow social distancing efforts

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As Pennsylvanians prepare for the eighth week of social distancing under Gov. Tom Wolf's stay-at-home order, psychologists warn that "caution fatigue" may start to affect people's choice to make safe

decisions for themselves and their communities.

People who experience caution fatigue become desensitized to warnings because their brain has adjusted to the alarms it's receiving, explained Jacqueline Gollan, an associate professor in psychiatry and behavioral science at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

"When a person is exposed to a warning repeatedly, they start to pay less attention to it and that can lead to either ignoring the alarms or not responding as quickly to them," Gollan said. "We are adjusting how we perceive that threat—the threat can seem uncertain, or we have a hard time understanding the true threat."

Already, some people have become more relaxed about social distancing. Researchers at the University of Maryland's Transportation Institute reported a recent nationwide decline in their Social Distancing Index, which uses location-based service data from cell phones to track compliance with restrictions meant to contain the outbreak.

The decline, which started April 17 and has continued since, is the first since social distancing measures began in March in the United States. This was seen last weekend, when people flocked to the beaches in California and New York despite pleas from both states' governors to stay home. In Pennsylvania, hundreds of people gathered outside the state Capitol on April 20, calling for Wolf to reopen the commonwealth.

Eric Zillmer, a professor in neuropsychology at Drexel University, says that not only do people become numb to danger over time, the COVID-19 crisis also has been "abstract."

"It is an invisible enemy and it targets specific vulnerable populations more than others," Zillmer wrote in an email. "So some, younger populations for example, may not feel particularly threatened. Wearing

masks or the energy it takes to comply with safety guidelines gets old very quickly."

Additionally, when people are worried about things they cannot control, Zillmer said, the body engages in the "fight or flight" response, which can cause feelings of anxiety, depression, apathy, and despair.

"Fight or flight is meant to be temporary, not permanent," he said. "Prolonged stress creates a weakened immune system and mental dysfunction."

Gollan said the negative emotions people are experiencing in response to prolonged [social distancing](#) measures can sway judgment. When people make a COVID-related decision, such as whether to stay home or travel to a family gathering, they weigh safety against the things that they're giving up, she said.

"These are complex processes and they take up energy," Gollan said. "People don't want to continue making these decisions, so I expect the decline in safety behaviors to continue as people start to show increased stress over the economic strain they're experiencing."

To avoid caution fatigue, Gollan said to focus on things that provide a sense of physical and emotional strength, such as exercising more, eating well, and setting attainable goals. Diversifying where you receive credible sources of information may also be helpful, since people pay more attention to news with variety, Gollan said.

"It can help to ask yourself questions when making a decision during this time, like, "Do I care about being a citizen? Do I care about being part of a team? Do I respect other people?" she said. "That can help you make a better decision and hold off on the temptations when we want to bend the guidance that we're being given."

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