

States begin to reopen during COVID crisis, but not everyone feels ready

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John Imbur

Virginia resident John Imbur doesn't plan to sit down for a meal in a

diner anytime soon, even if his state reopens for business after its stay-at-home order lifts on June 10.

"I don't feel comfortable going into places where there are going to be a group of people, particularly if they're unmasked," said Imbur, 50, a tech support worker in Blacksburg. "With a restaurant, no one's going to have their mask on because they're eating."

States plunging ahead with plans to reopen economies shut down over COVID-19 are encountering opposition from an unexpected quarter—their own citizens.

Surveys show that a majority of people remain uncomfortable about entering stores, restaurants and other businesses that closed in an attempt to slow the spread of the COVID-19 [coronavirus](#).

That's because people are walking risk calculators, constantly weighing the information on hand to judge their personal safety in a variety of situations, said Susan Joslyn, an associate professor of psychology with the University of Washington who researches risk perception and decision-making.

"They know there's uncertainty even if you don't tell them, and they know that risk varies," Joslyn said. "They try to estimate it. They try and figure it out."

About 78% of Americans agree with Imbur that they'd be uncomfortable eating out at a restaurant, according to results from a recent *Washington Post*-University of Maryland national poll. Two-thirds (67%) say they would be uncomfortable going into a retail clothing store, and 44% remain uncomfortable shopping for groceries, the poll showed.

In addition, two-thirds of Americans say that gatherings of 10 people or

more likely won't be safe until July or later, versus 32% who believe such get-togethers will be safe by the end of June, poll results indicate.

Joslyn compares these opinions to the way people use weather forecasts in their daily lives. Average folks don't need to understand probability theory to use a forecast to decide whether or not to carry an umbrella.

"That number gives them an estimate of their risk," Joslyn said. "They have a practical understanding of it, rather than a theoretical understanding of it."

That's why Imbur, who'd rather avoid dining out, doesn't think he'd have a problem going out to buy a new shirt.

"Clothes shopping? Eh, I think I will," Imbur said. "I go into Lowe's probably once a week, because I'm in and out."

"More [vulnerable people](#) perceive a higher risk for themselves and are less willing to do the kinds of things other people might find OK to do," Joslyn said of COVID-19. "The difference is, those other people do not perceive a greater risk for themselves."

Unfortunately, people do not have access to good risk information regarding COVID-19 at this time.

No one can tell you the exact contagiousness of coronavirus, or how many people have it in any given community, or even if the protective steps being touted by officials are enough to keep you safe.

Folks seeking information about their risk face a barrage of "very confusing communications from otherwise trustworthy sources," said Baruch Fischhoff, a professor with the Carnegie Mellon University Institute for Politics and Strategy in Pittsburgh.

Actual infectious disease experts compete for airtime with self-appointed experts, Fischhoff said, while political figures of all stripes pose as medical authorities.

Even information from [medical journals](#) has to be weighed on a case-by-case basis, Fischhoff said.

"The journals have lowered the bar for reports," Fischhoff said. "It's an effort to get things out as quickly as possible, but I think the standards of peer review are not what they would be under normal conditions."

As a result, people are struggling to perform subconscious calculations regarding their COVID-19 risk, Joslyn said.

"Whether or not they are conscious of it, people are calculating these likelihoods, even if there isn't good information about it," Joslyn said. "Those internal, possibly unconscious, calculations are at least part of what's going into their feelings about what should happen next."

Differences of opinion regarding COVID-19 are becoming explosive.

Stores trying to enforce social distancing requirements have been targets of violence. A Michigan security officer was shot and killed at a Family Dollar store earlier this month after asking a customer to wear a mask, and two McDonald's employees were shot in Oklahoma City by a customer angry that the restaurant's dining area remained closed.

Meanwhile, a 25-year-old man has been charged with assault in Austin, Texas, after shoving a park ranger into a lake while he was explaining the need for social distancing to a crowd.

"There are people who are at their wit's ends and are more likely to blow up at one another. That happens in normal circumstances, and that's

going to happen here as well," Fischhoff said.

Better government leadership could help head off these incidents, Fischhoff added.

"If we have leaders who do a good job explaining why they're opening up their states or not opening up their states, so it feels like a reasoned process where they're doing the best they can, that will help people get through this period," Fischhoff said.

Part of the problem is a lack of understanding about how COVID-19 spreads, Joslyn said.

"You not only have to take into account the risk to yourself, but the risk to other people if you get it," Joslyn said. "It's very complex reasoning, and it may be that people just don't understand, that it's something we need to communicate better."

Such reasoning is part of Imbur's family history—his great-grandmother died in 1919 during the Spanish Flu pandemic. Because of this, he has little patience for people who are publicly protesting state shutdowns and mask requirements.

"Were you rioting over having to wear seat belts and stopping at red lights and things like that? In a civil society, there are things we need to do to keep each other safe," Imbur said. "My concern is that those people who are doing that, not only are they more susceptible to get it, but they're also not going to stay home if they become infected. They've got this mindset that "I'm going to do what I want.'"

As scientists learn more about COVID-19, these differences of opinion will remain because people's personal risk assessment will always differ, Joslyn said. But common knowledge will provide more common ground,

even if the news isn't always happy.

"I don't think the goal should be making people more comfortable," Joslyn said. "I think the goal should be giving people accurate information so they can make good decisions for their own risk tolerance."

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have more about [COVID-19](#).

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