

What's our 'new normal' as COVID recedes?

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After two years of wearing masks and avoiding indoor crowds, navigating the next phase of the pandemic in South Florida can feel especially difficult.

Debra Touhey, of Cooper City, says she isn't ready to let down her guard

yet, but she's pushing herself a little.

For the first time in two years, Touhey, 63, ventured back to the movie theater with her 14-year-old son. She sat in the back row and bought the two seats on either side of her family, just to ensure [social distancing](#).

"I'm trying because this might be the new normal," Touhey said.

With omicron in retreat, Floridians are figuring out their new boundaries along with what COVID precautions they will permanently adopt and in which situations they still are not comfortable. In an online Sun Sentinel survey, respondents expressed a range of risk tolerance for travel as well as activities such as grocery shopping, indoor dining and attending business meetings without a mask.

All around there are signs of life coming back to a pre-coronavirus normal: The plastic barriers at cash registers came down recently at Publix nearly two years after they were installed. Masks are no longer being required at various performance arts venues in South Florida.

"I know a lot of people have stopped wearing their masks," Touhey said. "I still wear my mask almost every time in public and especially indoors. I feel I have to be as careful as can be. As older parents, our situation is unique. I won't deprive my son but we are going to go slowly."

The Florida Department of Health reports the virus is still infecting more than 10,000 people a week in Florida and killing about 1,000 on average. But with the positivity rate less than 3% in the state, and South Florida counties, many people are beginning to resume their pre-pandemic behaviors.

Hampden Smith, 81, is emerging from a pandemic mindset. He is taking this next phase slowly.

Smith and his wife, of Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, are vaccinated and boosted and have resumed going to church.

"It feels great. We really missed it," Smith said. "Most people are keeping a distance. There's not much hugging going on."

Smith, though, isn't ready to take off his mask in church, or Costco and Publix. "I will probably always be wary of indoor closeness," he said.

Some people say they are struggling with accepting risk.

Robin Gill, of Jupiter, says she is boosted and vaccinated, works from home, and is taking it step by step with resuming activities she did before the pandemic. This week, she ventured to a restaurant for the first time in two years. "The COVID mindset is a hard one to turn off," she said. "I don't feel like we are far enough out of the pandemic yet."

People are in different stages of gauging what's safe for them, says Broward psychologist Dr. Jessica Ruiz.

Ruiz said one of the reasons this phase of the pandemic is so hard to navigate is because some people have had more anxiety and more personal loss over the last two years of battling a disease that transmits invisibly at times. Others are still at high risk for hospitalization.

"We have to remind ourselves, everyone is different," she said.

Increasingly though, as new cases decline, [social pressure](#) to shrug off COVID precautions will play a role in what people feel comfortable doing, she said.

"Social pressure is actually very powerful," said Ruiz, chief psychologist at Goodman Jewish Family Services of Broward. "You are much more

likely to make decisions and follow through based on what the people around you are doing."

Pamela Jordan, of Boca Raton, said she's cautious but resumed her normal life months ago.

She is not vaccinated, had COVID in December 2021 and has stopped wearing a mask. "I took it off the second it was no longer mandatory," she said.

Jordan, 52, says she travels, attends parties, goes to the movies, the gym and medical appointments without a mask and with the mindset that she is going to live her best life. "People are scared and I can't fault them. I just think differently."

Young adults, the demographic in Florida with the highest cumulative number of COVID cases, were the first to return to crowded nightclubs, concerts and weddings.

"My friends and I have for the most part stopped wearing masks," said a 24-year-old from Fort Lauderdale who asked not to be named. "I don't think I should feel guilty about that."

After two years of taking precautions and living with uncertainty about where the pandemic is headed, some people have realized they want to make certain behaviors permanent.

Survey participants told the Sun Sentinel they will continue to have their groceries delivered, participate in doctor's appointments by Zoom, work from home as much as possible—and even use hand sanitizer more regularly.

Several dozen said they are healthier than before the pandemic and plan

to continue those behaviors.

"I went back to running regularly outdoors," said Stanley Eisen, of Pompano Beach. "It helps keep me sane."

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