

Brain fog, fatigue and fear of crowds: COVID survivors talk about post-pandemic life

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It may seem hard to believe, but it's been over four years since the COVID-19 pandemic ground our world to a halt, forcing us indoors and

apart, and ultimately changing the way we live.

It's hard to pinpoint the true "end" of the pandemic. The World Health Organization declared an end to the [public health emergency](#) related to COVID-19 on May 5, 2023, while the United States followed suit a week later on May 11. But the lingering effects of COVID-19 still exist.

For some, those lingering effects are mere nuisances—it's just another illness that has the potential to make you feel terrible for a few days.

However, for many others, the effects of the pandemic years are still very real. From the continued need to protect yourself due to a weakened immune system, to the psychological and physical toll that COVID-19 can take on the body, the pandemic is still ongoing for many people.

The impact is not just about catching and recovering from COVID, either.

Data from the National Institutes of Health shows that while frontline workers are more than four times more likely to have suffered from post-traumatic stress, 21% of the adult public have also reported symptoms. Studies on the impact of long COVID are few and far between because of the small amount of time since the pandemic began, but the NIH found that about 10% of people who initially caught COVID-19 now suffer from long COVID.

The Idaho Statesman recently asked readers how Boise residents are faring with post-pandemic life.

Mental health changes since the pandemic?

Of the 27 respondents to the non-scientific survey, 14 people said their

[mental health](#) hadn't declined since the start of the pandemic, while 12 people said it had declined. Two people did not respond to the question.

Multiple respondents described their mental state as "depressed," while numerous others said they feel "isolated."

Michael Pelton, a doctor with St. Luke's COVID Recovery Clinic in Boise, told the Idaho Statesman depression, anxiety and so-called "brain fog" are some of the most common signs of cognitive difficulties after contracting COVID-19. He noted that brain fog isn't a scientific term but a patient-created word to describe symptoms such as memory retrieval and multitasking difficulties.

"There is no medicine that we know works for brain fog," Pelton said, citing that there hasn't been enough time since COVID-19 began to conduct long studies.

Instead, Pelton said doctors will often use "off-label" medications. This is when a medication for one symptom, such as anxiety, is used to try and treat a similar symptom that came as a result of COVID-19.

"Oftentimes, we find ourselves having to use medications off-label," Pelton said. "Sometimes we use what are called stimulant medicines that might be used for someone with [attention deficit disorder](#), for instance, to see if it will help them be able to focus better if they have brain fog."

One respondent, Carol from southwest Boise, said she no longer wants to be in large crowds and dislikes the attitude of people who don't care for others' health.

Fortunately, it's not all negative. Idaho resident Danielle Terhaar told the Idaho Statesman that her mental health was "horrible for a couple of years," but she now has a more "resilient perspective."

"I'm better off after all the lessons I've learned," Terhaar said.

Did the pandemic have a lasting social impact?

Only 11 people said the pandemic did not have a lasting impact on them socially, while 15 people said it did have an effect. One person did not respond to the question.

The overarching theme was that people are less likely to go out than they used to, leading to numerous outcomes.

Nancy, from Boise, said she mostly avoids large crowds now and only goes to busy restaurants in the summer when she can sit outside. Terhaar also said she enjoys more at-home social events rather than attending bars and festivals, which has allowed her to value quality time more than she did before the pandemic.

Even four years after the pandemic began, some Idaho businesses continue to suffer. Don Waltermire, who lives in the Emmett area, said that his business still has to contend with supply chain issues.

What about physical health now compared to before the pandemic?

A lot can change physically in four years—the least of which is being four years older. As Idaho resident Michael Keyes told the Statesman, "I'm older and fatter, but that was going to happen anyway..."

However, for those who caught COVID-19, the effects continue to linger.

Marie, from Boise, told the Statesman that she'd lost her sense of

balance and that walking was difficult, making it challenging for her to play golf; she also reported bouts of confusion. Sue, from the Weiser area north of the Treasure Valley, also said her mental and physical capabilities have declined since the pandemic.

Fatigue is one of the more common indicators of long COVID, according to Pelton. He also said chest pains, headache and dizziness are all common.

"Fatigue is certainly very common, and often it's very extreme fatigue," Pelton said. "It's not just being a little bit tired; It's like not wanting to get out of bed, kind of fatigue. There's a lot of aches and pains, joint pains, arthralgia or muscle pains."

But, once again, not every outcome has been negative.

Nancy, who previously noted she avoids large crowds, also said the pandemic gave her the free time to work out.

"The shutdown led me to do home workout videos and hike more," she said, "and I lost 30 pounds."

How has your life changed since March 2020?

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in changes in people's lives across the Treasure Valley that wouldn't have happened otherwise.

Many people said their outlooks toward the medical system and government had changed, as had their views of people who blindly follow political figures and beliefs.

"Just aghast at how gullible people are in regards to eating up political, anti-science propaganda," said Nancy from Boise. "The hate they

express towards people who don't want long COVID is appalling."

JP from northeast Boise told the Statesman they are now "much more skeptical of government mandates and purported medical experts."

Meanwhile, others, such as Terhaar, have used the [pandemic](#) to focus on themselves and those around them.

"Awareness of others has increased dramatically," Terhaar said. "I shield myself more from 'public discourse' on anything and take good care of myself and those around me."

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