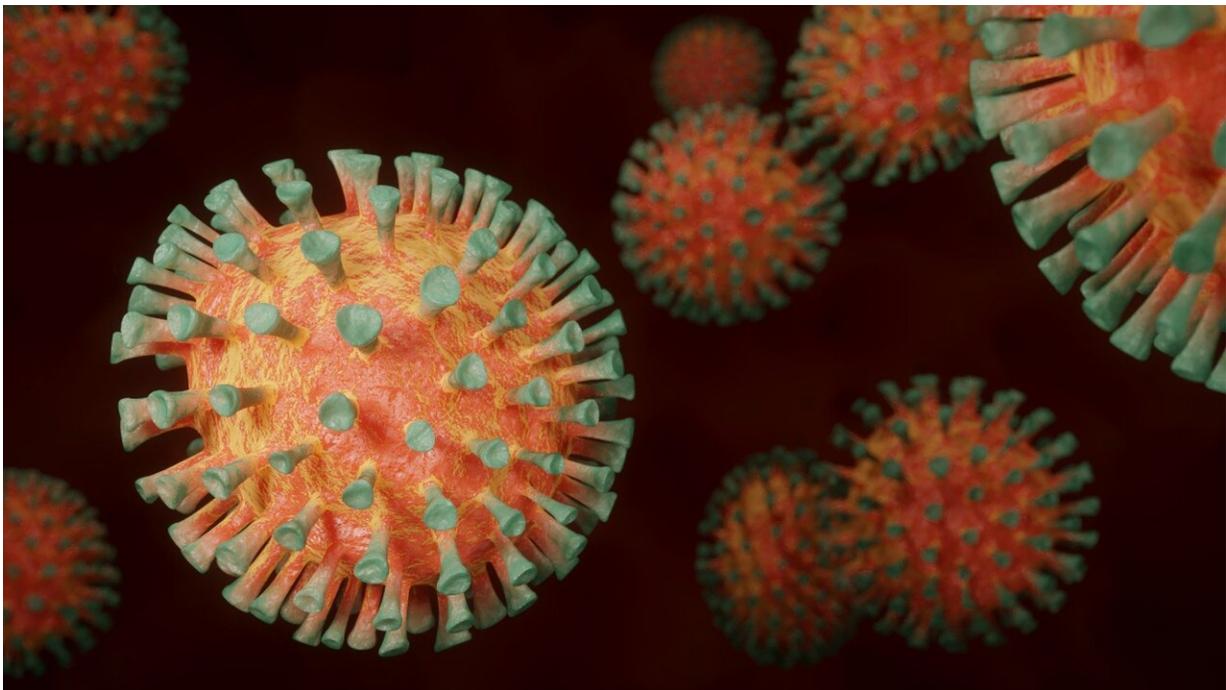


People are still engaging in risky behavior, despite rising COVID-19 cases. Psychologists explain why

November 24 2020, by Bethany Ao



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Coronavirus cases have spiked in Pennsylvania and New Jersey over the past month, surpassing the numbers of the pandemic's first wave in April, and yet many people have continued to meet up with friends at indoor gatherings and make plans to see family at Thanksgiving.

To curb the spread, Philadelphia officials announced restrictions last Monday that closed indoor dining, gyms and museums, and limited the capacity of outdoor gatherings. Gov. Phil Murphy also introduced new restrictions on gatherings in New Jersey.

But before the new restrictions took affect, people attended Halloween parties, worked out at gyms and dined indoors at restaurants, even as case numbers steadily climbed. So why did some people continue to socialize as the risk of contracting COVID-19 increased?

The answer is simple, says Melissa Auerbach, an assistant professor in psychology at Temple University. People are fatigued after many months of not being able to socialize, leading them to more easily disregard the rising number of COVID-19 cases during their decision-making processes.

"People have limited mental resources for self control," said Auerbach, who studies stress and [health risk behaviors](#). "We have all of these factors depleting self control, like the recession, the pandemic, and not being able to socialize like we used to. All this is very outside of our wheelhouse in terms of how we normally deal with self regulation and [self control](#) of behaviors."

When the ability to socialize disappears, "people go into a downward spiral," said Auerbach. That may cause them to seek out messaging that is more in line with their wants, as opposed to what is real, she said.

"If there was a stronger national message, people might be more receptive to limiting their behaviors," Auerbach said. "But right now there isn't that, so they are scavenging research and news to find the facts, and maybe going by what they just kind of see pops up in their news feeds."

The weather may also be playing a role, Auerbach said. October and November are prime months for [seasonal affective disorder](#) (SAD), and people might be seeking activities to help them relax and decompress, or tapping into their support networks more to cope with stressors.

Another reason why people are engaging in risk behaviors is because they have had more experiences in which they took a risk, like going out to dinner or removing their mask at a friend's house, without getting sick, said Elizabeth Gosch. That lived experience is more powerful in shaping behavior than hearing secondhand information about the possibility of getting sick or infecting others with the virus, said Gosch, a psychology professor at the Philadelphia School of Osteopathic Medicine.

"If we think of folks weighing the costs versus benefits, the costs are abstract (and) not tangible," Gosch said. "The benefits are more tangible—people get rewarded when they hug someone or see someone or eat at a restaurant."

Gosch also said that people are more likely to engage in risky behaviors when they see a powerful figure, such as the president, doing the same. For most people, the reported numbers of those who have died from COVID-19 is an [abstract concept](#), she pointed out, and not nearly as powerful as watching someone in a position of authority say that it's necessary to wear a mask or engage in social distancing. At this point, after months of the pandemic, many people are also losing their fear, said Gosch.

"My father-in-law was saying that he wouldn't get sick from some people because he knew them," Gosch said. "Clearly, that has nothing to do with risk, whether you know someone, but he trusts them because he knows them ... so he cannot see that they could be a carrier of the virus."

Auerbach also highlighted the idea that some people may now think that they are impervious to the virus, if they haven't yet contracted it. What people don't realize is that all it takes is "one little slip-up," she said.

"It's like being on a diet for eight months and one night you decide to eat a piece of chocolate cake," Auerbach said. "In that case it's fine, you might look a little bloated the next day or feel a little nauseous. But with the virus, it's very serious, and you can get extremely sick."

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