

## **Remember How We Used to Leave the House Without Masks?** **How I Miss Being Free of Paranoid Anxiety**

I don't miss socializing with other people much and I don't miss going to restaurants or theaters. Instead, here's what I miss the most about my pre-pandemic, pre-quarantined life: In my prior life, I could leave my house without a shred of paranoia. That's what I miss—going out into the public world, for whatever reason, without feeling vigilant, threatened, or anxious. In the good old days, I might have had reservations about where I was going, but I did *not* have the overlay of worry that I currently carry with me. Now, like most of us, I venture into the world feeling that I have to be on guard against threats posed by a world that has suddenly become dangerous. This simple fact of my current life—the need for a self-conscious vigilance and carefulness—activates a physical stress response, triggering, as it does, the release of adrenaline and cortisol into my body. And the accumulation of these stress hormones makes my public outings something of a strain and, over time, floods my system in ways that are extremely unpleasant.

In respecting stay at home orders, I don't go to many places: the grocery store, drug store, and an occasional restaurant for takeout food. I go to a driving range at a golf course and hit range balls off by myself. And I take walks in my neighborhood. I wear a mask when appropriate and practice social distancing. But, paradoxically, these safety practices end up contributing to the problem because the mask and the need for distancing are constant triggers, reminding me of the ever-present dangers. My brain is thus signaling me all the time to be hyper-aware of the IEDs that the coronavirus has buried everywhere.

I don't really miss socializing with other people very much. What I miss is NOT being worried when I leave the house. It's not that I used to feel carefree when I went into the world; the trials and tribulations

of everyday life were always there. But I didn't feel then what I feel now—namely, a subtle sense of peril from and the need to play defense against some invisible enemy. I feel now as if I can't help but almost osmotically absorb the messages that the media are constantly sending, that the world is a dangerous place and that it's important for me, for all of us, to be constantly alert, constantly vigilant.

So when I go into a grocery store, it's a planned event. There can be no sense of mindless wandering. Instead, I approach the errand as if I am part of a special-ops team on a mission. Mask, gloves, hand sanitizer, reminders of no face-touching, carts that have been wiped down, a masked counter at the door monitoring customers, floor markings that extend checkout lines well back into the store aisles, noticing people without masks—these are all on my mind at all times. Taken alone, these considerations are not traumatic, but taken together, they represent an uncertain and treacherous world.

No wonder that when I get back home, I feel like I'm a survivor.

Obviously, the problem of being unable to leave the house without worrying, without vigilance, is dwarfed in the lives of so many people who are, themselves, sick, or are worried about loved ones getting sick, or are financially hurting. And the psychosomatic toll of contending with potential dangers in the public world hardly ranks up there with the grief one feels about losing a loved one to Covid-19 or the helplessness of front-line providers who have to helplessly watch their patients crash.

Still, for those of us who are objectively safer or have more resources than others, it's important not to let survivor guilt diminish our claims to suffering. All of us are struggling, together and as individuals, and all of us deserve understanding and empathy. We live in a world where danger is a type of background radiation impinging on

our minds and our bodies. It's stressful, tiring, and unhealthy. The best we can do, I believe, is to get through each day without hurting ourselves or others, and to find comfort wherever it can be found.