



"Normal" really just means "get used to it".

Welcome to the New Normal

The march of the pandemic shuttering the world is far from over but the **global quarantine** is being dismantled in bits and pieces. Ready or not, the **comatose economy**, an overdose of **cabin fever**, and glorious summer blooming beyond our window panes have all conspired to end the **Great Lockdown**, at least for now. But as experts keep pointing out, reopening is going to be a whole lot **trickier** than shutting down everything was.

Social distancing is still the only sure way to fight this killer. But can we depend on others taking the proper safety measures anymore? It's up to each one of us to act with a double dose of caution so we don't wind up in a worse situation than before.

So now what? Being extra careful will serve us well if we are forced to isolate again in case of a resurgence or the dreaded second wave hits this fall. Any **lull** should be used to prepare for the next round. For the first thing we must realize is that the life we fondly miss from before Covid-19 may well be gone forever. The carefree, wide-open lifestyle of 2019 is past history now, and thinking we can pick it back up is a recipe for killing even more people.

Nothing will really be again as it still is on TV until an effective **vaccine** is made, tested, and taken by most of the world's population. Labs are working overtime together to do this, and the internet has allowed them to process data and **collaborate** like nothing before. But even with breakthroughs or a miracle cure, the process will likely take years.

It is therefore wise to practice the new skills we have learned during this time-out so they are handy and ready to go at any moment. Some things that come out of this situation will be simply too useful to give up, even for the older set. Most people had to stretch their computer expertise in unexpected ways to deal with all of this while stuck at home.

Hopefully, the most important lesson everyone will take away is that with the right tools, a good

connection, a little encouragement, and a bit of patience, just about anything can be accomplished.

The internet survived

A good connection proved essential, so no surprise that internet usage **spiked dramatically** during the lockdown. Verizon said voice usage of its network climbed **25%** in the first week, web traffic by **22%**, and streaming services by **12%**. But online game action shot up by **75%**. This might indicate that most folks were already set up beforehand for work, but took the sudden opportunity to play.

Comcast noted that peak net usage shifted from after work to various periods throughout the day. Cloudflare, a cloud-based network security service, reported a sudden **40%** rise in hard-hit cities like Seattle, one equivalent to that of hosting the Superbowl or the Olympics.

In Europe, streaming services agreed to temporarily lower the highest screen resolution available to avoid overloads at the request of the EU. In the US, **internet data caps** imposed by some ISPs have been voluntarily lifted. Satellite TV provider Dish got FCC approval to sell its unused spectrum to major telecom companies to increase capacity. But other than promoting rural healthcare video connections, the FCC did **very little** to help **despite calls** for aggressive action by a commissioner.

However, **choke points** could throttle Zoom and other high-volume services over older DSL and cable networks, like many still used here, where downloading speeds are generally much greater than speeds for uploading. If you have lags, check with Tech Support to see if you are already at the fastest speeds available in your neighborhood.

Scams, spam, and snake oil

What brought out true nobility in so many people let out real evil in others. Criminals are doing their very worst to take advantage of desperation combined with government relief. The FCC issued a **warning** against Covid-19 related scams, but **refused** to act against false information being

spread over the broadcast media. However, the FDA is **actively warning** about fraudulent products and rip-offs, including any and all “do it at home” test kits.

Meanwhile, phishing attempts shot up over **235%**. Even worse, scammers have **registered** over **150,000** fake stimulus check domains. Most of these are copies of IRS’ actual **Get My Payment** website, waiting to grab your information to steal your check. Make sure you are really at www.irs.gov before entering anything. Remember also that the IRS is **way too busy now** to email, call, or text anyone, to threaten, promise, or even answer questions.

Working at home works

According to **statistics**, over **5 million** people were already working from home when this began – that’s **3.6%** of the workforce. Claimed benefits of telecommuting are that workers are more productive, richer, smarter, stable due to flexible hours, and are generally happier and less stressed.

Working from home was already a growing trend before the pandemic. While current figures are not yet available, the quarantine likely kicked it into overdrive. But the **interesting thing** is that those who actually could work from home before this were often higher paid people who handled data such as executives, accountants, and IT managers.

Although **42 million** (or **29%** of the workforce) **theoretically** could telecommute, most Americans did not before now. Doubtless many more have been forced to one way or another, but the vast majority with “real” jobs will never be able to, no matter what.

Working from outside the office will become a permanent feature of the workplace and a perk. Already there are pages full of **sage advice** on how to **manage a home office**, or video-call etiquette. But in this brave new world, workers are less likely to share ideas or comment during video meetings and miss the regular office banter. And new programs like one called **Sneek** snaps shots of all workers via webcam every 5 minutes so everybody can watch everybody else to make sure everybody is working.

Pandemics vs. privacy

Privacy issues were also a growing concern before the virus hit. Those conflicts may sharpen too, but right now, any trend towards greater personal privacy protections has been **stopped cold**. This seems inevitable for the urgent need to detect and confine this perplexing invisible menace means that every single person’s health and interactions with others is now a matter of vital public concern.

South Korea and China, the populous nations that have been most successful in getting the

outbreak under control, did so largely by rigid crackdowns, **widespread testing** and society-wide **high tech methods** of tracking and surveillance that would be illegal here in the US.

Smart people around the world are working night and day to apply **artificial intelligence** to the problem. Disease projections for health officials are driven by **complex algorithms** and big data. Many programs rely on **sophisticated phone tracking** of individuals and groups. And all that math is displayed on constantly-updated **maps and charts**.

Such technologies cannot only precisely follow members of groups but monitor the success of social distancing measures. **Monitoring Google inquiries** and **smart thermometers** are other ways of learning what’s going on. There are already **smartphone apps** available to let you know if you’ve been near someone who later tested positive.

But there’s only so much that anonymized data can do. Though Apple and Google were **promising privacy protection** for these new contact tracing phone apps, at some point officials will need to know the identities of who is exposed, where, and when. Who knows? A year from now, we may all carry around electronic passes on our phones and pass through any number of monitoring stations on our daily business. It’s way too soon to say.

The shape of the world that Covid-19 leaves us will be strange yet strangely familiar. Life will go on, with new barriers, far fewer hugs, and the latest **fashions in masks**. But in the back of our minds will always lurk the specter of death brought about by a sudden sneeze or a thoughtless touch.

Yet even this is really nothing new. Most of our ancestors throughout history lived under fearful threats. Some of us remember growing up in the shadow of a mushroom cloud, complete with **“duck and cover” air-raid drills**. Even as children, we knew we could be vaporized at any second. We survived the Cold War thanks to a lot of luck or grace but also because of adults’ courage and thoughtfulness. It’s our turn to provide the same for the next generation.



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