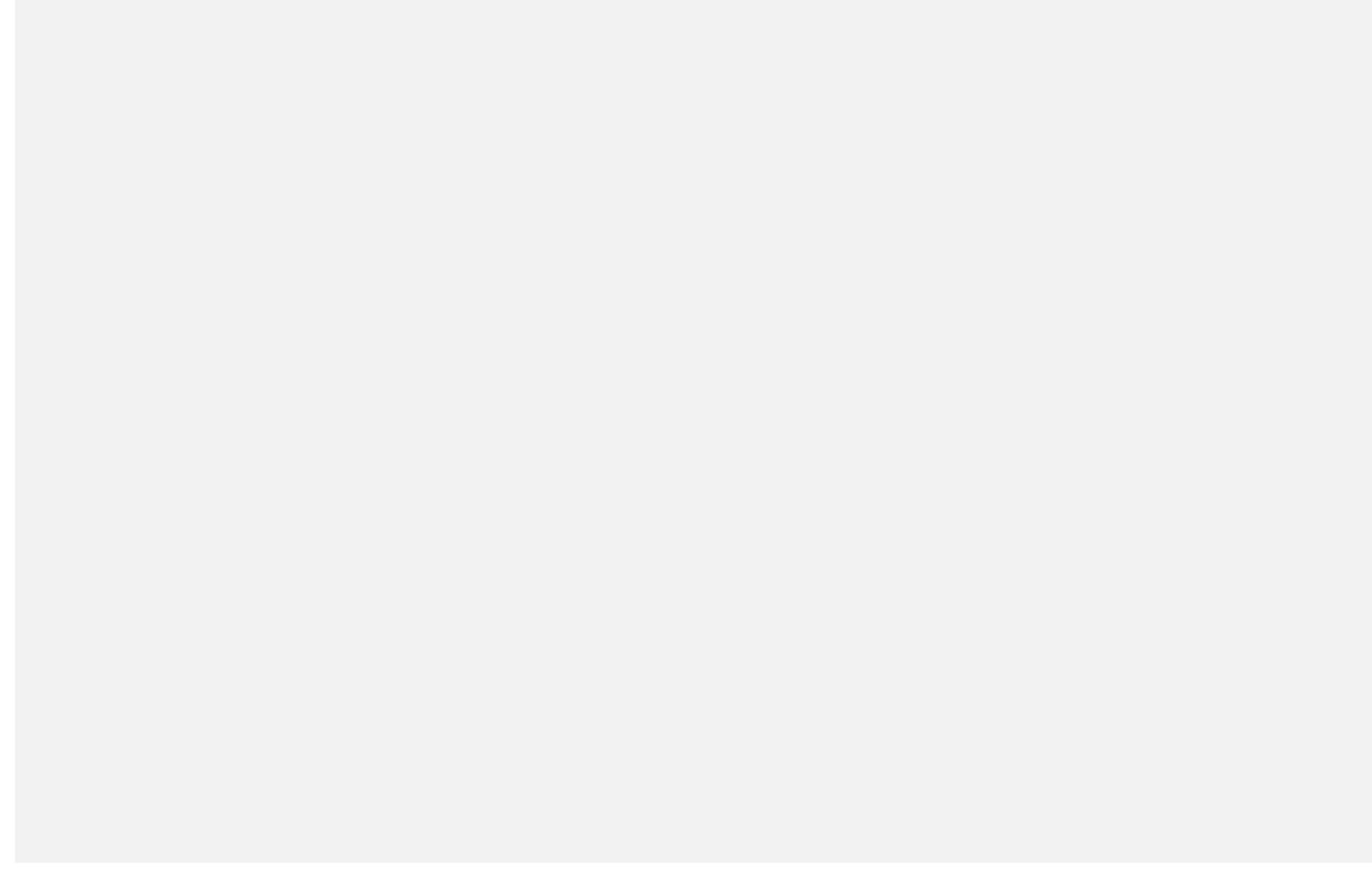




How Judging Others During Times of Crisis Can Make Us Feel Safe

During this unprecedented time we don't know how to act; sometimes internal anxiety gets projected as judgment.

Ronit Plank (rhymes with so-neat) Follow Dec 23 · 5 min read



Young girl and her mother stare out a window with masks on. (Image via Canva)

I consider myself a careful, germ-conscious person — scared enough of COVID-19 to take it seriously but not paralyzed the way I was at the start of this health crisis. A pretty healthy mix of respect for the destruction the virus leaves in its wake and the sense that, having muddled through nearly a year of pandemic life, I'm safe to let certain areas of my day-to-day slip into the more livable. Beyond basic and irrefutably sound guidelines like wear a mask, wash hands frequently, avoid large gatherings and quarantine if exposed, I believe I've found my equilibrium.

So when I was on my way to a 3-hour dental procedure I didn't want to put off anymore and my friend on the other line said he couldn't believe I was actually going, that he hadn't been to the dentist or any doctor since the pandemic began because he was too nervous about getting sick, I felt irritated. I was annoyed at what felt like judgment on my friend's part, and not for the first time since Covid-19 numbers blew up in Spring of 2020 and most of us began to drastically change the way we live, I instantly felt my own judgyness clapping back at him.

But depending on where you live protocols may vary. Apart from the maskless who consistently flaunt the rules of basic science, response has run the gamut. I have friends whose children are going to school in person every day with masks, others without masks, friends whose kids are doing hybrid school in-person and virtual class on alternate days, and kids who have had no school whatsoever since last spring like where I live.

The virus has brought up differing approaches among families and friends too. Some gather regularly, many in only small groups outdoors and 6 feet away, and still others appear to be living more monastically avoiding all but the most necessary contact and errands.

When my loved ones and I are on the same page precaution-wise my decisions feel sound, but when they differ, self-doubt creeps in. Over the summer 3 friends and I got Covid tested and rented a house a short ferry ride away for a long weekend. We sat on restaurant patios and when we ate inside one rainy night we did so at a plexiglass-divided restaurant. Of course none of this seems like a good idea now that numbers are raging, but with the data we had at the time we went ahead with our plans.

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When I told a girlfriend in California about my trip, she told me she hadn't had food from a restaurant in nine months — not even delivery — and still wipes her groceries down before bringing them inside. As I listened to her those peculiar feelings hit me again: irritation that my friend might be judging me and my own kneejerk retaliatory judgment of her. I wanted to say *for god sakes, get takeout already, live a little*. But underneath that was something else: worry that I'd acted dangerously, that I was in fact making the wrong choice.

Being out of step with others can be particularly uncomfortable when the usual social norms and structures have broken down. Lisa Butler, a therapist in Chicago, explains that under normal circumstances we have a framework for our decisions and “the calculated risk we take every day like driving to work or taking a plane that could fall out of the sky.” But during this unprecedented time we don't know how to act. “People are so nervous and so scared, internal anxiety is at an all-time high and gets projected via judgment.” It can even be plain-out jealousy on some levels she says, “because they want to do these same things but they're scared because we've never been in a situation like before.”

These days, making the wrong decision can mean severe illness or death.

“We do all these things to make sure we don't suffer, so we don't have to feel vulnerable, or human.” — Nicola Mendenhall

As a rule-follower well aware of the strain health care workers are under I wasn't sure why someone else adhering even more strictly to guidelines could irk me the way it did. Nicola Mendenhall, author of *Fear, Folly & Freud: A Psychotherapist in Psychoanalysis*, suggests it goes back to how strongly the idea of hierarchy is within us. “If somebody is different from us, we don't know where we fit in. We get irritated by not knowing and we have to make them wrong or outsiders. We either have to be better than them or above it all.”

So that's what my judgy reaction might be about: self-protection and evolution at work on a level I don't *consciously* think about helping me cope with a lack of control over a dangerous uncharted pandemic that I don't know how to navigate by attempting to create a hierarchy of right or wrong. My poor human attempt at gauging what are appropriate and inappropriate responses to the unknown.

We're funny creatures,” Mendenhall says. “We do all these things to make sure we don't suffer, so we don't have to feel vulnerable, or human.” Whether that means staying at home and guarding ourselves from the outside world or in my case getting my teeth taken care of or my hair cut so I can feel normal again for an hour. “It's like loss,” Mendenhall says. “We lost a lot of stuff and when we lose something, we have a judgment about whether it was fair or not.”

I think most of us agree that none of what's happened with this pandemic is fair and all of us have felt the consequences. Part of what we lost in 2020 was the idea that if we do everything “right” we'll be okay. The next time I feel defensive about my choices or judgy about someone else's I will try to remember that my reaction is really about my wanting to feel safe.

That is what we all want to feel. Now more than ever.

Covid 19 Jealousy Self Protection Fear Anxiety

90 claps



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