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Life Is Now a Dark Game of Would You Rather

A scientific way to assess pandemic threats

Kayt Sukel Sep 30 · 4 min read



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So much of life now seems like a rather dark game of Would You Rather? This summer, my husband and I asked ourselves: Would we rather send our kids back to school where they'll benefit from traditional instruction and social interactions — but also potentially pick up and bring home a viral infection? Or would we rather keep them safe at home, knowing they will be miserable — and, thus, in true teen fashion, do their best to make us miserable, too? Talk about lose-lose.


You likely now have the option of going out to eat at a restaurant, letting your kids participate in Little League, or even grabbing a couple of beers somewhere. Even as these opportunities to get out and about become available, Covid-19 is still very much with us. And that means we each have to choose where we are willing to take risks. Is in-person school worth it? What about a [social get-together](#)? A couple hours of work at your favorite coffee shop? An early morning workout at the gym?

Just how should we be doing the calculus on this new risk assessment math? Here's a two-step approach:

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Frame the question

“Just because certain things are now open, doesn't mean those things are always safe — there is still substantial risk involved,” says Leana Wen, MD, an emergency physician and public health professor at George Washington University. “As people make decisions about doing different things, it's important they understand that any risk you take is additive. So, if you engage in one area that's risky, you should try to reduce risk in other areas when you can.”

Top highlight

Deciding where it makes sense to engage, however, is challenging. What makes these risk assessments even tougher is the fact that it's so easy for our decisions to be swayed by factors like stress, what our social groups are doing, and the difficulty of parsing so much contradictory information. Mauricio Delgado, head of the Social and Affective Neuroscience Lab at Rutgers University, said even how you frame the question about a particular risk — in a negative or positive light — can alter how we decide.

Delgado points to a classic [study](#) that used the flu as an example. Researchers presented subjects with a choice. If 600 people are affected by the flu, you can choose treatment option A, which will save 200 people. Treatment option B offers a 33% chance of saving everyone or a two-thirds chance all 600 will die. Most people choose option A, which they perceive to be the conservative approach.

“But if you frame that same problem in a negative way and say that with option A, 400 people are going to die and option B gives you a 33% chance of saving everyone, people will take the risk on option B.”


Framing things as a loss fundamentally changes how you perceive your options. Always look at the negative and the positive.

Then, change the scope of your thinking.

Now Is the Worst Time for Covid-19 Fatigue

Scientists fear an exhausted nation will let down its guard just as cooler weather raises risk of a twindemic

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Set your risk budget

Every decision to engage with the outside world is a discrete event that comes with its own risks. But Wen suggests that it's important to think about each of those decisions cumulatively. In fact, she recommends a risk “budget,” where you take calculated risks where it is most beneficial for you and your loved ones and forego others that aren't as valuable.

“If you want to get a haircut, great — but then maybe you don't go out for a meal,” she says. “If you are thinking about in-person school because it's best for your family, then skip birthday parties and other [social events](#). Whenever you are taking on more risk in one situation, you can balance that out by cutting down on risk in others.”

A budget can be empowering. It's a way to live your values and still [protect you and yours from harm](#). It's also a way to push some of those factors like stress and social factors to the side so they don't have an outsized influence on your decisions.

When my family started to think about our own budget, we realized that in-person school was not in the cards. Our school just didn't seem prepared to maintain the necessary safety protocols. We decided we would rather “spend our risk” on allowing our kids to participate in outdoor extracurricular activities like cross country and marching band. Open-air activities (with appropriate mask and social distancing guidelines) would give the kids some of the social interaction they craved — and also get them out of the house.

We reframed the situation, we budgeted out our risk, and we came to a decision. It's not what I expected to see in our family's budget — but it's a plan that works for us. As you start to consider your own risk budget for the pandemic, carefully assessing how much risk you have to work with based on your location, your needs, and your values, it's likely you'll find a more empowering strategy that works for you, too.

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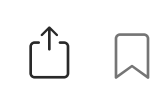
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