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Despite social distancing measures, spring breakers flocked to Florida beaches, including Pompano Beach, pictured in this March 17 photo. Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) later shut down bars and some beaches for 30 days. | Julio Cortez/AP

"I'll do what I want": Why the people ignoring social distancing orders just won't listen

As a few cling to old mottos of patriotism and perseverance in the face of the coronavirus crisis, one expert warns it could be a "formula for disaster."

By Eleanor Cummins | Mar 24, 2020, 4:00pm EDT

The Highlight BY *Vox*

The world has officially separated into two camps: the rule followers, observant of **social distancing** and hopeful of **flattening the curve**; and the risk-takers, who have been storming the world's beaches, bars, and burger joints in spite of the coronavirus — and government and public health efforts to curtail its spread.

The new virus has pushed dozens of countries **to implement strict isolation** methods to prevent a global health crisis. In China, coronavirus measures were hard to evade, as authorities **sealed apartment buildings** and **scanned millions** for rising body temperatures. But in the United States, Australia, and much of Europe, these restrictions are harder to devise and enforce, mostly because democratic norms and a strong sense of individual liberty prevail. And so the crisis has also revealed humanity's tendency to flout the rules.

In recent weeks, people swarmed beaches around the world, from **Florida** to **Bondi Beach in Australia**. "If I get corona, I get corona," one spring breaker **told Reuters**. "At the end of the day, I'm not gonna let it stop me from partying." (He later **apologized**, calling his comment "insensitive.")

Washington, DC, Metro officials **practically begged** riders not to visit the city's iconic cherry blossoms, which they did anyway, **in droves**. Brits took to crowded pubs to **chant "f*** coronavirus!"** And one woman went viral when she **tweeted** about her defiant trip to a crowded Red Robin restaurant. "It was delicious," she tweeted, "and I took my sweet time eating my meal. Because this is America. And I'll do what I want."

Visitors walk around the Washington, DC's Tidal Basin on March 21 to see the cherry blossoms, despite social distance warnings and city efforts to dissuade visitors. | Eric Baradat/AFP/Getty Images

Many companies have held on, too, seemingly convinced of their own necessity. Starbucks kept its doors open even as employees organized to protect their health. "Coffee is not essential at all," one barista **told Vice**. "Starbucks is not essential." (The company has since shifted to drive-thru and delivery only.) WeWork, the coworking behemoth, is still open — and **charging its members rent** — even as several of its facilities were linked to **confirmed coronavirus cases**. "[W]e have an obligation to keep our buildings open," company chair Marcelo Claure and CEO Sandeep Mathrani **wrote in a memo**.

The poor reaction of a small segment of people to ever-stricter quarantine policies comes as no surprise to psychologists, sociologists, and public health experts. No one alive today has experience with a pandemic of this severity, catching even the most experienced researchers off-guard, not to mention the average person sorting through their Facebook feed. Conflicting government messaging has only exacerbated the widespread confusion.

And the prevailing public health advice around coronavirus counters the long-held wisdom that we must "carry on" in a crisis: For at least a century, citizens have believed that in the midst of a disaster, their job is to go on with their daily lives as best they can — otherwise, the enemy will win. Now, the government is telling people the best strategy is to upend their lives entirely.

"We feel like we have to do something," said **Robert Wuthnow**, a sociologist at Princeton University and author of *Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats*. But without a good frame of reference for the present crisis, we've looked to lessons learned from past calamities, including natural disasters, terrorism, war, and economic collapse, to guide us. "We're a little bit like generals fighting the last war," he said.

But the old rules no longer apply. Planetary problems such as a pandemic or climate change are different, said **Amy Fairchild**, a public health ethicist and the dean of Ohio State University's College of Public Health. "In this moment in time, 'carry on' could be a formula for disaster."

When the coronavirus first arrived in the United States, people cast about for comparisons. "So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu," President Trump **tweeted on March 9**. "It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing

is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!"

Experts including Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and a regular at the White House's coronavirus press briefings, debunked the comparison. "The flu has a mortality of 0.1%," **he told Congress on March 11**. "This has a mortality rate of 10 times that." But **the analogy** — intended to make an extraordinary threat look like ordinary — persists.

In reality, the coronavirus has no clear analogue. "The normal mechanisms we're using to predict things don't work," said **Tali Sharot**, a professor of cognitive neuroscience at the University College London who studies human motivation. "Actually, nothing else that has happened before in our lifetimes is relevant or helpful here."

Many contemporary disaster mantras emerged in past wars, and they often contain a kernel of a consumerist message. At the outset of World War I, British politicians such as Winston Churchill encouraged "**business as usual**," suggesting that both companies and citizens should continue to behave just as they did in peacetime. But the status quo eventually gave way to a coordinated defense effort when the state realized it would need to control manufacturing, trade, and commerce to win the war.

Twenty years later, in World War II, the British government **coined "Keep Calm and Carry On**" to boost morale in anticipation of a Nazi invasion. But it quickly pulped the test posters; other campaigns about courage in a crisis provoked public outcry, as many people found the messages tone-deaf. After **half a century**, however, the phrase was exhumed — in part as a message to those weathering the Great Recession.

The Princess of Wales Theater in Toronto bears the famous British wartime poster reading "Keep Calm and Carry On" on March 17. |
Steve Russell/Toronto Star via Getty Images

An electronic ad from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in a Washington, DC, subway station on March 14. The "Keep Calm"
message, discarded during WWII, became newly popular in the Great Recession. | Bill Clark/CQ-Roll Call via Getty Images

In times of crisis, Americans have borrowed English idioms, and coined a few of their own homespun mottos for personal and economic perseverance. During the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt made an enemy of an emotion, telling the public, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself."

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President Bush gave this famed aphorism a **consumerist spin** when he **told airline employees**, "When [the terrorists] struck, they wanted to create an atmosphere of fear. And one of the great goals of this nation's war is to restore public confidence in the airline industry. It's to tell the traveling public: Get on board. Do your business around the country. Fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida."

"Get down to Disney World" was probably never meant to apply to the people who actually **traveled to the Magic Kingdom** earlier this month amid public health warnings to avoid crowds. But that hasn't stopped some politicians from applying this logic to the coronavirus. In a White House press briefing, **President Trump said**, "America will again and be soon open for business," and later suggested **relaxing guidelines by Easter**, despite expert predictions that social distancing rules may need to last three or more months.

Hours before California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) shut down restaurants and bars to slow the spread of the virus, Rep. Devin Nunes (R-CA) told the American public, "**It's a great time to go out**" and support the local economy. In Philadelphia, organizers of the annual St. Patrick's Day Parade, which typically draws 20,000 participants and even bigger crowds, resisted pulling the plug until a few days before the event. "The fact is we have to continue as a population to go on with our lives," Michael J. Bradley Jr., the parade's grand marshal, **told PBS**.

"It's almost like we don't want the virus to win, so we're going to go out drinking, go to parties, go out to the beach," Wuthnow said. But these are risky responses when the enemy is not a person or a bad year for the stock market, but a virus — one that can be **transmitted asymptomatically**.

"IT'S ALMOST LIKE WE DON'T WANT THE VIRUS TO WIN, SO WE'RE GOING TO GO OUT DRINKING, GO TO PARTIES, GO OUT TO THE BEACH"

Humans are generally terrible at assessing risk. But it's proven especially true in the case of the coronavirus. "It's about our risk to others, and that might make it a little

more difficult to understand," said **Cynthia Rohrbeck**, an associate professor in clinical and community psychology at George Washington University. People are used to talking with their doctors about their personal health, but taking responsibility for the health of others comes up only infrequently, often in public discourse around smoking, drinking and driving, and vaccines.

Our judgment could be clouded by optimism bias, the tendency to believe you are less likely than others to experience something negative. Gallup polling in March found that most Americans say they are **following social distancing practices**. But in late February, researchers polled 4,348 people in France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland and found **half of them** believed they were less likely to get the coronavirus than others, sans real evidence. Another poll, conducted in mid-March on more than 800 people from the US, the United Kingdom, and Germany, **suggested** this optimism was bolstered by people's belief that they had fewer human interactions than their peers, making their risk of contracting the virus inherently lower.

These biases can even be institutionalized — and create confusion as the science, and related policy, evolves. Early reports suggested the virus was the biggest threat to people over age 60 or those with underlying conditions. On March 12, the United Kingdom's Prime Minister Boris Johnson championed a **"herd immunity" strategy**, which seemed to encourage young people to go about their business and contract Covid-19. But as the risk became clearer (in the United States, for example, **38 percent** of people who are sick enough to be hospitalized are under age 55, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), Johnson reversed course and **shut down social gatherings**.

When countries finally began to roll out isolation measures, they encountered additional obstacles. "One of the most important things for people is to have a sense that they are in control of their own life, that they have agency," Sharot said. In a **recent paper** in *The Lancet*, researchers reviewed 24 past publications on the psychological effects of quarantine and found it can cause post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion, and anger.

But the desire for agency can have an ideological component, too. In China, the authoritarian government has wide latitude to control the behavior of its citizens. But in the United States, few Americans have experienced government-imposed restrictions on when they can go out and whom they can see.

Many politicians have criticized the rules as an infringement on people's freedom, not to mention a disaster for the economy. Arizona state **Rep. Anthony Kern** (R) and

Oklahoma **Gov. Kevin Stitt** (R) both tweeted (and deleted) defiant photos from crowded restaurants. "We can't all just shut ourselves and stay home," Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI) **told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel**. "The economy has to move forward."

"Me, personally, I just refuse to live my life in fear," said Katie Williams, the 30-year-old Las Vegas resident who went viral for her Red Robin tweet. "As Americans, we typically do what we want. It's kind of that attitude we've always had," she added. "I think if we're going to start pressuring people that they have to stay home, or publicly shaming them like pariahs, I think we're just starting to lose a little bit of our sense of country and our sense of rights."

> I just went to a crowded Red Robin and I'm 30.
>
> It was delicious, and I took my sweet time eating my meal. Because this is America. And I'll do what I want.
>
> — Katie Williams (@realkatiejow) March 14, 2020

Fairchild, the public health ethicist, said she understands these concerns. But there are other rights to consider. "As an individual, I have a right not to be infected by somebody who is not paying attention," she said.

The coronavirus isn't the only global disaster humanity is up against. While the pandemic will eventually end, climate change is an existential crisis that keeps on giving. Neither disaster will allow us to carry on, said **Susan Michie**, a health psychologist and the director of the Center for Behavior Change at the University College London. "I think what this [pandemic] is showing is that collectivism is absolutely necessary," she said. "Both in a pandemic and the climate emergency, no one can go away and protect themselves. It's not like that anymore."

People may bristle at being told what to do — especially when European and American coronavirus quarantine strategies look superficially similar to those used by authoritarian nations such as China or Singapore. But Michie saw it another way: "We elect people to [make] decisions at a national level to look after ourselves. That's not authoritarianism, that's democracy."

Frolicking crowds at Australia's Bondi Beach on March 20 amid coronavirus concerns garnered international news coverage, and led the government to close it and similar beaches. | Jenny Evans/Getty Images

DC can **close its streets** and lifeguards can kick surfers and suntanners out of Bondi Beach, but officials are largely dependent on the public's compliance in a crisis. "This is not something we are doing because we are the fun police," an Australian official **said in a press conference** as he implored people to stay home. "This is about saving lives." To convince people to cooperate, Michie said politicians need to communicate a clear sense of urgency, while **providing support** for everyone who is forced indoors. "We're interconnected," Michie said, and the coronavirus proves it.

*Eleanor Cummins reports on the intersection of science and popular culture. She's a former assistant editor at Popular Science and writes a **newsletter about death**. She previously wrote about **the "death-positive generation"** for The Highlight.*

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