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CANADA

Feeling overwhelmed by your decisions as the lockdown lifts? You're not alone

By **Douglas Quan** Vancouver Bureau

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Suddenly, in this unfamiliar [COVID-19](#) world, we've got some decisions to make.

The questions vary depending on where we live: Is it safe to give our moms and grandmas a hug? Should we accept that invitation to a backyard barbecue? Can we go visit our favourite clothing store? Is it OK to have a picnic in Toronto's busy Trinity Bellwoods Park or go play a round of golf?

Things seemed so much simpler a couple weeks ago, didn't they?

Government messaging seemed clear: Stay home. Wash your hands. Keep your distance in the checkout line.

Easy.

But now, the easing of restrictions has ushered in a new, uncertain normal filled with more wiggle room and personal discretion — where one misstep could affect us, our loved ones and our communities.

"The onus of risk management has now shifted from the government to you as an individual," Ross Otto, a psychology professor at McGill University, told me. "I think that's where you're going to start to see more variability in the way people manage risk, because it's now in their hands."

Not everybody feels equipped to make these decisions, looking instead to governments for guidance. In turn, some academics suggest it's not enough for governments to rely on scientific experts alone for pandemic planning. They need to include regular, everyday people in the deliberations, not dissimilar to courtroom juries.

In the meantime, some have embraced the loosening of lockdown measures. Take my colleague Jeremy Nuttall, who was [among the first](#) in line to get a haircut last week. "I feel like a human again," he told me after getting his unruly locks lopped off by his stylist, who wore a mask and visor.

Others, like awkward kids at a high school dance, have chosen to remain on the sidelines. That was me when I chickened out of making an appointment for my own desperately needed haircut.

Part of my reservation stemmed from my recent conversation with Katrina Shelast, owner of a boutique hair salon, Grow Conscious Hair Co., in Port Coquitlam, B.C. Though salons are allowed to reopen in B.C., she's in no hurry.

"Nobody's hair is more important than anybody's health or their life," she said, adding the father of one of her co-workers died after becoming infected.

As much as she wants to get back to work, Shelast, who has a lung condition, wants to make sure she has proper protocols in place.

“This is one of the first times in my life I feel like I’m not eager to be the first person to do something.”

A few days ago, she posed a question to clients on Facebook, asking if they’d be OK foregoing blow-drying services “knowing that blow-dryers will move air and particles more easily.”

Most said they were fine with it.

Otto doesn’t blame people for feeling overwhelmed.

“Everything we know is pre-pandemic. There are these new areas of risk that one didn’t think of before.”

Of course, not everything has been left to our own devices. Government bureaucrats and industry groups have recently prescribed — sometimes exhaustively — myriad ways to mitigate risk in online playbooks.

In Ontario, golf courses have been advised to leave flagsticks in place and to elevate cups at each hole so the ball doesn’t drop into the hole, according to [guidelines](#) from the province’s Workplace Safety and Prevention Services. “Play is concluded when the ball makes contact with the cup.”

In Alberta, [guidelines](#) stipulate restaurants should remove table condiments, such as salt and pepper, and consider “keeping music to a low volume to help customers avoid leaning in to hear each other.”

Meanwhile, the requirement that B.C. restaurants record contact information from one person at each table to make it easier to notify people in the event someone tests positive was too intrusive, some critics said.

In Washington State, the outcry against a similar measure was even louder. “Why is the onus on the restaurant to be a secretary for the government?” Jason Rantz, a Seattle radio host, wrote online.

The measure was [subsequently retracted](#) and made voluntary.

In B.C., where K-12 students will be able to return to classrooms on a part-time and strictly voluntary basis on June 1, the Vancouver School Board has [outlined](#) a number of “physical distancing strategies.”

One reads: “Students will be reminded to avoid close greetings (e.g., hugs, high-fives, handshakes, etc.)”

“Students will be reminded about keeping their ‘hands to yourself,’” says another.

Some Quebec and B.C. parents have circulated online petitions saying the partial reopenings of schools in their provinces is too soon.

“I absolutely don’t want my kids to be guinea pigs,” wrote one mother in the [Quebec petition](#), which has close to 300,000 signatures.

The [B.C. petition](#), signed by more than 22,000 people, states that children K-5 are just “too young to carry the social responsibility to effectively sanitize themselves for the health & safety of others.”

“The shortest route to our second wave is to send our children back to school.”

That hesitation was echoed in a [new poll](#) out this week by Research Co. More than half of British Columbians said they wouldn’t attend a live sporting event (61 per cent) or a music venue (59 per cent) until there was a vaccine. And 43 per cent said they weren’t comfortable taking a bus until there was a vaccine.

While there are still some pockets of protest against the curtailing of freedoms, a friend told me on WhatsApp that she’d be more comfortable with more explicit rules from government — enough leaving things up to individuals.

“I WANT A DRACONIAN GOVERNMENT RIGHT NOW.”

Melissa Williams, a University of Toronto political science professor, said she wasn’t surprised.

“There is a temptation in times of crisis to revert to top-down, authoritarian styles of governance. Your friend’s wish for a ‘draconian government’ is understandable because the pandemic presents a collective action problem in the classic sense: Policies can’t be effective unless the vast majority of people comply with them. This is as true of economic reopening as it is of physical distancing.”

But there are real tradeoffs, Williams said, and “in a democracy we should try to agree upon them in a democratic way.”

But how to reach a consensus when points of view are so diverse?

NHL star Taylor Hall, who had just started playing for the Arizona Coyotes when the season shut down in March, told NBC Sports from his home in Toronto recently he was eager to get back on the ice.

"I'm comfortable taking a risk and coming back to play," he told the network. "I think we take risks every day with what we do, and I think certainly there are risks involved with everything going on. But I'd be willing to put that aside and hopefully play hockey again this year."

But Hubert Leung, a physiotherapist in Toronto, who's still waiting for the province and College of Physiotherapists of Ontario to give the green light to reopen clinics, said "rushing things is the last thing we want."

Leung acknowledged he's getting a bit antsy — especially with clinics opening in other provinces — as virtual sessions are just not the same.

In Ontario, the number of COVID-19 cases is trending upward again.

"I'd love to get started, but will open only if I feel it's safe," he said.

A group of academics in B.C. and Ontario has an idea for how governments can find the sweet spot between protecting health and economic recovery: Talk to regular people.

In the coming days, they will [host a series](#) of "online public deliberations" with B.C. residents to gauge which pandemic measures they're willing to live with and which ones they're not. Recommendations flowing from these discussions will be forwarded to the B.C. government.

Team member Kieran O'Doherty, a psychology professor at the University of Guelph, said this is believed to be the first initiative of its kind in Canada since the start of the pandemic.

"You let COVID run wild, you're going to have one particular group suffer with more illness and more death. You lockdown really tight, some of the people who would've been sick are going to be saved, but some people can't work or lose their livelihood," he said.

"The decisions the government makes have very real and very differential effects in the Canadian population. So the argument is whenever a decision like that is made by the state, democratic principles say people should have input on those decisions."

The first sessions will focus on the controversial use of contact tracing apps on phones, which can be used to show travel patterns and identify potential coronavirus clusters.

The plan, he said, is to get a diverse group of people in a virtual room, have them share how the pandemic has affected them and try to reach a consensus on the best response. The hope is this will yield a richer discussion than if it was a bunch of bureaucrats around a table.

"Most (bureaucrats) probably haven't had their pay cut. So they wouldn't have that perspective. Can they empathize sufficiently to understand how somebody would feel going through that? Maybe. But ... most of us working in this field would say, 'No, that is not a sufficiently diverse set of perspectives.'"



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