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WILL FAMILIARITY BREED CONTEMPT FOR COVID-19 WARNINGS?

More than three decades ago, I published several scholarly articles about what I and other scholars in the fields of communication, human factors and psychology called “the familiarity effect.” Very simply, I concluded that those people with the **most** familiarity (i.e., experience) using a product or experiencing an event or phenomenon would be among those **least** likely to follow warnings about any dangers or risks they might confront. For example, swimmers with the most experience diving into a pool would be the least likely folks to follow “no diving” signs posted, even prominently, at the pool. Or college students who have been spending every weekend at a house party are not likely to follow “no drinking” warnings, if indeed they were announced by the host of a new party they were attending for the first time. What I fear the most today is that the “familiarity effect” may be starting to infiltrate our Covid-19 weary populace.

As I write this newsletter, Governor Andrew Cuomo of my home state, New York, has been proudly posting week after week of extremely low statewide infection rates well under 1% of the almost 100,000 people/day New York State has been testing, by far the largest number of people being tested in the United States and even more significant, the lowest infection rate in the country. While New York is probably the most successful state in the U.S. to bend the Covid-19 curve, Governor Cuomo is not resting on his laurels and claiming, as others in leadership positions have incorrectly shouted, “Mission Accomplished!” Quite the contrary, as Governor Cuomo publishes his daily good news reports, rather than taking a victory lap, he ever so sternly and gently (as only he can do) warns New Yorkers, “This thing isn’t over yet!” He constantly reminds us all to “mask up” (with a now national PSA campaign well underway), “keep our distance”, “stay outside as much as possible” “wash or sanitize our hands constantly” and “avoid crowds, especially in indoor settings.” At the same time, seven months after we first heard of this virus and contrary to decisions made by many too-eager states, Cuomo has still kept indoor dining and bars off limits in NYC, prevented crowded venues such as theaters, concert halls, operas, sports venues from opening at all, while installing very strict crowd-regulated procedures for phased openings of museums and outdoor venues such as zoos, botanical gardens and even schools.

All of the above sounds great, except for “the familiarity effect.” As Shakespeare so eloquently wrote, beware of being “hoisted by your own petard.” Our success story may actually lead to our own downfall...if WE are not careful and start to become complacent with our own success. We can’t let down our guard, or, as Cuomo is fond of saying, “we can’t take our foot off the gas pedal” (of safety). We must not fall victim to the “familiarity effect.” What are some examples that may apply to you, especially if you live in a town, city, region or state where there has been a recent decline in Covid-19 cases, hospitalizations or infection rate? Perhaps you have been relying upon food delivery both for meals and/or your shopping needs and you decide to venture outside to an outdoor restaurant. Depending on your acceptable risk tolerance, you decide to go to a restaurant which

has plastic shields at right angles that separate tables that are at least 6 feet apart from each other. That may be better than going to a restaurant without such protections. Or, perhaps you are a senior who wants to go shopping at your favorite grocery store but haven't done so in months. Be sure they have "senior hours" where you are less likely to be shopping in crowds. Since this is still the middle of summer, many of you want to go to the beach. You should still keep socially distant from other beachgoers and avoid crowded situations...and, as hot as it is outside, keep your mask handy for situations where you may confront others, especially within 6 feet of you. You may miss hanging out at a bar with friends, but there literally is no way to do that safely at the present time. I could list dozens of examples, but you get the idea.

The "familiarity effect", as it relates to Covid-19, simply means that your familiarity with the community safety results and your own personal success, to date, coupled with our natural desire as social beings to socialize...at almost any cost...may cause you to ignore Governor Cuomo's and others' warnings. We cannot let our familiarity breed contempt for the Covid-19 warnings. Yes, we all have different levels of risk tolerance, and yes, we are paying a high price to follow the warnings, and yes, my own research predicts that if the cost to comply with warnings is high, warning compliance tends to be low, but we must not reduce our vigilance. REALITY CHECK: even when we have a vaccine or many great therapeutics, it will take many months, perhaps even more than a year, to distribute a vaccine to sufficient numbers of us so that we can resume even some of our prior pre-Covid-19 lives. Until then, we must learn to live with the virus and follow the advice of our scientists and health officials...and only government leaders who model after Andrew Cuomo's sage advice, "This thing isn't over yet!"

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