

Learning Lessons From the Past

We're already forgetting the best lesson from the 1918 pandemic. There are individual and collective dangers to this forced amnesia.

Less than a decade after the 1918 influenza pandemic, Victor Vaughan, a physician who lived through it, published a book called *A Doctor's Memories*. About the pandemic he wrote:

"I am not going into the history of the influenza epidemic. It encircled the world, visited the remotest corners, taking toll of the most robust, sparing neither soldier nor civilian, and flaunting its red flag in the face of science."

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, historians and casual observers alike have turned to the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic for potential lessons. But prior to Covid-19, the Spanish flu pandemic was so infrequently discussed that one of the relatively few books on the subject is literally called *America's Forgotten Pandemic*.

Now, historians say the biggest lesson we can learn from the 1918 pandemic is how quickly people wanted to forget about it. We're already repeating the mistake, experts say, and that's worrisome. There are individual and collective dangers to this forced amnesia. It's bad for our mental health and it leaves us more vulnerable to future pandemics.

Could we really forget this pandemic?

In September 2021 U.S. Covid-19 deaths even surpassed the Americans dead from the 1918 flu: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, that pandemic caused an estimated 675,000 deaths. In September, Covid-19 deaths in the US reached 675,400 people. We have now reached over one million Americans dead from Covid-19.

But despite these staggering numbers, it doesn't take long for our memories to shift.

In 1920 and 1921 it was pretty much party central - as if the pandemic didn't happen.

To be sure, there are many important differences between the two pandemics, and our post-pandemic era is likely to be different than it was in the 1920s. But it's still human nature to move past uncomfortable feelings as quickly as possible.

Why we are so eager to forget traumatic events

Jessi Gold, a psychiatrist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Washington University's School of Medicine in St. Louis, says the reason we want to move past traumatic events like a pandemic is quite simple:

"We don't like to feel hard feelings, it's not always conscious or purposeful. Sometimes we're just trying to move forward."

Whether it's because we experienced a personal tragedy during the pandemic or simply want to move past all the fear and uncertainty we experienced during the pandemic, dealing with our feelings about it can feel like a can of worms.

"We don't always know what kind of worms we're dealing with," Gold says. "That unknown part is scary to people. It means you have to hold whatever is inside the can, deal with it, and move through it. We don't want to do that. It feels like it would be easier to just ignore it."

While moving on quickly might work for some of us, Gold maintains that's not realistic for most of us.

"You can try to push [the trauma and fear] down like a beach ball," she says. "It might go under the water briefly. But eventually, it's going to come back up."

Not only is pushing ourselves to move on terrible for our mental health, but it also inaccurately shapes how we think about pandemics and the pathogens that cause them. And if how we think about pandemics isn't accurate, we can't effectively prepare for them.

How do pandemics end?

Put simply, a pandemic is an epidemic of an infectious disease that's prevalent over a whole country or world. But that's not actually how we process them emotionally. We think of pandemics more as a crisis - a disease that's spiraling out of control, a new and dangerous pathogen we don't have a vaccine for and don't fully understand how to treat. You know, Covid-19 throughout most of 2020 - and 2021.

But there's a difference between a pandemic crisis and a pandemic we've learned to tolerate.

While experts now say Covid-19 will likely transform from a pandemic to endemic disease, pandemics don't have an on and off switch. A pandemic's end has less to do with meeting certain measurements, and more to do with a collective perception of the disease.

The question is not how do pandemics end? but rather do pandemics end?

Living with a constant pandemic isn't new to us, we're already doing it. In the last 100 years, many pandemics and epidemics we faced *haven't* ended.

A prime example is the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which causes AIDS. The AIDS pandemic has not ended. "It's not killing as many people in the United States as it did in the 1980s, but since about the early 90s, there have been about 50,000 new cases here every year. And that's just in the United States. The HIV/AIDS situation in sub-Saharan Africa is better than it used to be, there are still parts of that continent where 20 to 30 percent of the population are infected. Yet how many of us think of HIV/AIDS as an ongoing pandemic?"

Another example is influenza. While there are so many virtual strains of the flu, some might consider each year its own novel virus. But the current prevalence of the flu may be the result of that 1918 pandemic.

There were epidemics of flu prior to 1918. But you can make the case that 1918 seeded flu viruses so widely in the world, that they've just been a constant presence since.

Likely, there will be some threshold for Covid-19 risk that becomes widely acceptable. That doesn't mean we have to live in the fear - *nor should it make us feel free of any risk.*

Being alert and living full lives aren't mutually exclusive, though it may feel that way depending on the status of Covid-19 cases in your community. After a summer of *"this is fine"* and a fall of boosters, we're seemingly moving toward winter with climbing case counts. It is hard to imagine a world where we forget Covid-19, despite all the signs suggesting a lapse in memory will happen.

But it shouldn't. Forgetting makes us vulnerable to the next threat.

We can, and should, both enjoy the freedom that vaccinations provide and simultaneously be aware that nothing is foolproof and viruses can mutate in sneaky and unexpected ways. By holding space for both of these truths, we can stay alert and prevent future pandemics without living in fear.

Thanks to
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A Song on the End of the World

On the day the world ends
A bee circles a clover,
A fisherman mends a glimmering net.
Happy porpoises jump in the sea,
By the rainspout young sparrows are playing
And the snake is gold-skinned as it should always be.
On the day the world ends
Women walk through the fields under their umbrellas,
A drunkard grows sleepy at the edge of a lawn,
Vegetable peddlers shout in the street
And a yellow-sailed boat comes nearer the island,
The voice of a violin lasts in the air
And leads into a starry night.
And those who expected lightning and thunder
Are disappointed.
And those who expected signs and archangels' trumps
Do not believe it is happening now.
As long as the sun and the moon are above,
As long as the bumblebee visits a rose,
As long as rosy infants are born
No one believes it is happening now.
Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
There will be no other end of the world,
There will be no other end of the world.

Czeslaw Milosz

Warsaw, 1944




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