

We've Hit Peak Denial. Here's Why We Can't Turn Away From Reality

October 2024

We are living through a terrible time in humanity. Here's why we tend to stick our head in the sand and why we need to pull it out, fast

Objectively speaking, we are living through a dumpster fire of a historical moment. Right now more than one [million](#) people are displaced and at risk of starvation [in Gaza](#), as are [millions](#) more [in Sudan](#). Wars are on the rise around the globe, and 2023 saw [the most civilian casualties](#) in almost 15 years.

H5N1 bird flu has [jumped to cows](#), farmworkers have been [infected](#), and scientists are [warning](#) about another potential pandemic. According to data from [wastewater](#), the second [biggest](#) COVID surge occurred last winter. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated [at least 28,000 people](#) died of COVID in the U.S. between January and early August 2024.

Last year was the [hottest ever](#) and had [the highest recorded number](#) of billion-dollar weather and climate disasters. Not

to mention that over the past few years, mass shootings have significantly [increased](#), mental health issues have [skyrocketed](#), and we've seen unparalleled attacks on [democracy](#) and [science](#).

Truth be told, things were pretty bad even before the pandemic started four and a half years ago, with the Great Recession of 2008–2009, the 2009 swine flu pandemic and Brexit. Academics use terms such as "[polycrisis](#)" and "[postnormal times](#)" to describe the breadth and scale of the issues we now face.

Welcome to the new normal, an age where many things that we used to deem unusual or unacceptable have become just what we live with. Concerningly, though, "living with it" means tolerating greater suffering and instability than we used to do, often without fully noticing or talking about it. When authorities tell us to [resume normal activities](#) after an on-campus shooting or give [guidance](#) on how to increase our heat tolerance in an ever hotter world, we may sense that something is awry even as we go along with it.

But what happens when overlooking and tolerating greater levels of harm becomes a shared cultural habit? Like the proverbial frog in boiling water, we acclimate to ignoring more and caring less at our own peril. In the short term, living in a state of peak denial helps us cope. In the long run, it will be our undoing. The danger here is desensitization: that we

meet this unprecedented litany of complex problems, from climate change to the rise of fascism, with passive acceptance rather than urgent collective action.

How do we overlook and become hardened to bad things, especially in this scientific and technological age, when we've never been more capable of understanding and addressing them? To resist complacency, we must first understand how it operates.

Social scientists have long investigated the social organization of [denial](#), or how we collectively achieve reality-adjacent lives in which serious problems are [not recognized](#) or are made to seem normal. [Research](#) has found that a key factor leading us to "not see" social problems that should beg for our attention is the [neutralization](#) or [evasion](#) of disturbing or threatening information.

COVID is a good case study for illustrating the collective-denial playbook that underpins our new normal reality. A common strategy to neutralize a social problem is to make it difficult to know about—by [scaling](#) back COVID tracking, for instance. In April the CDC [ended](#) the requirement that hospitals report COVID admissions and occupancy data, removing one of the last tools we could use to monitor what's happening. "We now enter the blackout phase of epidemiology," [wrote](#) science journalist Laurie Garrett in May on X, adding: "There will be patients, but their numbers and

whereabouts will be unknown...."

Disappearing is also accomplished by not alerting the public. For example, during the winter COVID surge, the White House was silent. In fact, as COVID positivity and death rates rose, tweets from CDC director Mandy Cohen [decreased](#). If the COVID situation is tracked and the public warned, things don't feel normal. But if we don't monitor or mention it, then things can feel back to normal.

Another tactic is minimization, which is why it's important to notice when neutralizing language enters the chat. For some time now, turns of phrase such as "endemic" and "during COVID" have been common vernacular. So have refrains such as "lower hospitalizations than last year." All of this language gives off an "it's just a cold," "mission accomplished" vibe, casting the disease into a worry-free zone safely behind us.

This minimization keeps the quiet part quiet: that [the world is still in a pandemic](#) per the World Health Organization and that more than [73,000](#) Americans died of COVID in 2023, a higher number than from car accidents or influenza. Among those who have been infected, about 10 percent [have long COVID](#), a serious and often disabling condition with a disease burden [comparable to that of cancer or heart disease](#) and an economic cost [rivaling](#) that of the Great Recession, for which there are no approved treatments.

What's more, each infection, no matter how mild, is associated with a substantially increased risk of health issues, including [cognitive dysfunction](#), [autoimmune disease](#) and [cardiovascular problems](#).

Prepandemic, these statistics would have been eye-popping. Now they constitute "back to normal." We think we no longer have a problem, when we've just changed the standard by which we deem something concerning.

To shore up collective denial, we also rewrite the past. Not only do we repeat that we are better off now, we claim things were never that [bad](#). Contesting the past to remove unwanted memories produces a cultural amnesia about the pandemic. And in burying the past, we sidestep accountability for what went wrong.

Truth tellers are the Achilles heel of collective denial because they call attention to what's being ignored. Thus, another playbook tactic is to hush them up, often by painting them as subversives or deviants. And so those who wear masks are ridiculed, scientists reporting on COVID risks are cast as fearmongers, and those with long COVID are dismissed as having anxiety disorders.

Time and again society [pressures](#) people not to see, hear or speak about the elephant in the room. To maintain our own peace of mind, we tune out, malign and shoot the

messengers because they remind us of what we would rather disregard. Just look at physician [Ignaz Semmelweis](#), environmentalist [Rachel Carson](#), and NFL player and social justice advocate [Colin Kaepernick](#). Indeed, people are regularly [punished](#) for being right.

So what do we do about our “ignore more, care less, everything is fine!” era? We need to stop enabling it. We can start by being more attuned to the everyday ways in which we ignore or otherwise fail to engage with troubling events—like that pinch we feel when we know we should click on a concerning headline but instead scroll past it.

We need to work harder to catch ourselves in the act of staying silent or avoiding uncomfortable information and do more real-time course correcting. We need to guard against lowering our standards for normalcy. When we mentally and emotionally recalibrate to the new normal, we also disassociate from our own humanity. We need to demand that our leaders give the full truth and hold them to account. We must stand up for the silenced and stand with the silence breakers. To counter the new normal’s assault on normalcy, we must double down on our [duty to know](#), to speak up and to remember.

This is an opinion and analysis article, and the views expressed by the author or authors are not necessarily those of Scientific American.

