

Two years into the pandemic, which of our newly formed habits are here to stay?

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Credit: Inga Seliverstova from Pexels

The World Health Organization [officially declared](#) COVID a pandemic on March 11, 2020. Now, two years later, there's light at the end of the tunnel. In many wealthier countries, which have benefited from several rounds of vaccination, the worst of the pandemic [is over](#).

We've got here by learning a lot of "new" [health behavior](#), like wearing masks and sanitizing our hands. Many of us have also developed a variety of social habits to reduce the virus's spread—such as working from home, shopping online, traveling locally and socializing less.

But as parts of the world emerge from the pandemic, are these new habits [here to stay](#), or do old habits really die hard? Here's what data can tell us.

Work

One of the biggest changes [predicted](#) during the pandemic was a long-term shift towards home or hybrid working. However, there are already signs that this transition might not be as obvious or complete as expected.

In the UK, the proportion of people working from home at least some of the time increased from [27% in 2019 to 37% in 2020](#), before falling to [30% in January 2022](#). Similarly, in the US the proportion working from home [declined](#) from 35% in May 2020 to 11% in December 2021.

One of the main reasons people are going back to the office is employers' expectations. Many companies [are concerned](#) that more permanent home working might affect employees' team building, creativity and productivity.

But among employees, there's a greater appetite for hybrid and flexible working. One recent [multi-national survey](#) found that whereas roughly

one-third of workers had worked at home at least some of the time before the pandemic, roughly half said they want to in the future.

Shopping

The pandemic didn't create the habit of online shopping, but it makes more of us do it. Did this make us realize we don't need actual stores anymore?

It doesn't seem so. Shopping in bricks-and-mortar stores has already started to recover. Recent [data on people's movements](#), gathered anonymously from [mobile devices](#), shows how in many countries, before omicron hit, travel to retail and recreation spaces was back up to pre-pandemic levels, and is already starting to rebound after omicron.

The rise in online sales has also not been as dramatic or sustained as many predicted. In the UK, [online sales](#) made up 20% of [total retail sales](#) before the pandemic. By February 2021 this had risen to 36%, before declining steadily to 25% in February 2022.

Travel

One [habit](#) that might take longer to recover is our pre-pandemic love of international travel. It has [taken a hit](#) around the world, and the sector is still struggling. The UN's International Civil Aviation Organization projects that international travel in 2022 will still be down by nearly a half compared to 2019.

One [British survey](#) conducted last September found that while 80% of people were planning on holidaying in the UK in the next year, only around 40% were considering going abroad. In comparison, in the 12 months up to July 2019, [64% of Brits](#) traveled abroad for a holiday

according to one travel industry body.

People's reluctance to travel has been largely down to concerns over the virus and confusion over [travel rules](#). As worries decline and rules get lifted, we may see a "[mini-boom](#)" in holidaymaking.

Socializing

Early in the pandemic, some commentators—including the U.S. chief medical adviser Dr. Anthony Fauci—[suggested](#) we might never return to shaking hands. I, with my colleague Dr. Kimberly Dienes, argued that it was vital these rituals make a comeback, as they have several social, psychological and even biological benefits.

Are social-distancing habits, including meeting fewer people and having less physical contact with those we do, here to stay? For most people, no. [Data](#) shows only one-third of people in the UK are still socially distancing regularly, the lowest proportion since the pandemic began.

But truly, only time will tell how much the pandemic will have changed our habits. However, bolder predictions—that the pandemic was going to completely and irrevocably change our ways of working, shopping, traveling and socializing—now seem premature and exaggerated. The pandemic has taught us we can work, learn, shop and socialize in different ways, but the question now is whether we still want to.

Humans have [basic needs](#), such as autonomy, feeling related to others, and feeling effective and competent in what we do. Part of the challenge with home working, for example, is that it simultaneously fulfills one need by giving us [greater autonomy](#) but takes away another by making us [less connected](#). Expanding adequately supported, [equality-focused](#), hybrid and flexible working arrangements is perhaps a promising way to meet both needs.

Some people will have acquired a sense of competence, or at least familiarity, with the new ways of doing things during the pandemic and so may wish to keep doing them. In some areas—traveling overseas, for example—it may take longer for our competence, and confidence, in old habits to return. However, many seem to be quite quickly returning to old ways and re-learning how to feel competent at doing things that they did before.

The extent to which we'll go back to our old ways may also depend on our [personality traits](#), which have [been shown](#) to shape our compliance with new behavior. For example, those more open to new experiences by nature, or more extroverted, may be more eager to [travel](#) internationally or socialize in larger groups.

Finally, the pandemic may have served as a reminder of how much we appreciate everyday interactions with others, in shops, restaurants and so on. People may be keen to return to familiar ways that revive this—for example, picking something up in a store on the way [home](#) from work. Above all, the [pandemic](#) has taught us that we need to connect with others and that there are limits as to how much online communication can replace real, face-to-face interactions.

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