

Comment

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Living with Our Pandemic Trade-Offs

After two and a half years of COVID, we seem to have arrived at another judgment: the value of normalcy exceeds that of caution.

By Dhruv Khullar

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Illustration by João Fazenda

Isaiah Berlin, the twentieth-century philosopher, spent much of his life arguing that we can't have it all. In any weighty societal matter, worthwhile values invariably clash: liberty and equality, justice and mercy, impartiality and love. Such collisions, Berlin wrote, are "an intrinsic, irremovable element in human life," and realizing some ends "must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others." But he also argued that we can soften the impact of this "value pluralism." Our aim should be to "maintain a precarious equilibrium that will prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choices—that is the first requirement for a decent society."

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