

Unprecedented Language

Pandemic-inspired words help us make sense of the new normal

BY SARAH A. SAMUEL

ON DECEMBER 31, 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in China reported cases of pneumonia of an unknown cause. On February 11, 2020, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the World Health Organization then named this disease COVID-19. “COVID-19. I’ll spell it: C-O-V-I-D hyphen one nine,” he said. Back then, life was mundane and there were only 393 cases of a new respiratory sickness outside China. Little did we know that the odd scientific acronym would reign as an era-defining word in our daily vernacular.

Languages evolve as new incidents shape our reality, and historically health crises have brought a boom in our lexicon. The ups and downs of life during this pandemic haven’t been easy (it’s a *coronacoaster*). However, the old terms that gained new recognition during the pandemic act like a lexical social glue that binds people together to make sense of a new reality. Here’s a small selection of COVID-19-related words that journalists have used to inform the public since the initial spread of the virus early last year.

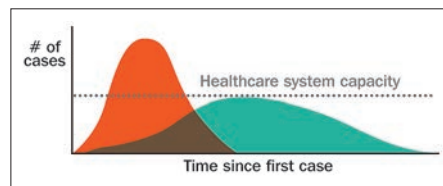


ANTI-MASKERS *noun*: People who oppose wearing a mask during the COVID-19 pandemic, usually citing mistrust in medical professionals.

The phrase originated a few months into the pandemic as a response to the mandatory masking laws. Shortly after, many Canadian cities, including Vancouver,

Winnipeg, and Toronto, saw protests that supported the “March to Unmask” movement. The movement argues that masks in public spaces should be optional, and not mandated by the government.

Even though the Public Health Agency of Canada and the World Health Organization deem wearing a mask a necessary step in slowing the spread of COVID-19, Canadians have varied sentiments. In the summer of 2020, two weekly surveys by Leger and the Association for Canadian Studies found that between June 26 and July 12, there was a nine percent increase in support for masking bylaws. Between July 10 to July 12, the poll found 67 percent of Canadians supported mandatory masks for all indoor public spaces, compared to 58 percent just two weeks prior; 27 percent were against the measure, while six percent remained undecided.

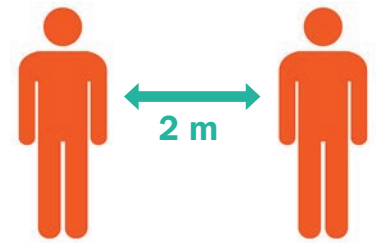


FLATTEN THE CURVE *verb*: A phrase used to describe the potential deceleration of the COVID-19 spread.

This term—coined by University of Michigan’s Dr. Howard Markel—is illustrated by graphs like the one above, which compare the infection rate with and without protective measures, such as stay-at-home orders and masks. With said measures, the chances to “flatten” the curve increase.

PHYSICAL/SOCIAL DISTANCING *verb*: To maintain a one-to two-metre distance from people who are not in one’s social bubble.

As noted on the WHO website, the virus spreads when an infected person coughs,



sneezes, or talks. Then, the droplets from their mouth and nose can become airborne and land on nearby people. Since this can happen even when one is asymptomatic, it is essential to maintain physical distancing rules (also referred to as social distancing earlier in the pandemic).



DOOMSCROLLING *verb*: The act of incessantly scrolling or surfing through social media feeds to consume the torrent of bad news.

According to *Quartz*’s former global finance and economics reporter Karen Ho (known on Twitter as the Doomscrolling Reminder Lady), she has been using the term since late March last year. However, during the pandemic and (mostly) because of Ho’s evening self-help reminders, the phrase gained traction.

SOCIAL BUBBLE/CIRCLE *noun*: A small group of people, usually from more than one household, who socialize together while avoiding contact with other families. In addition to social distancing and masks, bubbling is another approach to minimizing close social contact with the general public.

Dr. Tristram Ingham, a senior research fellow at the University of Otago in Wellington, coined the term “social bubble” for the disability sector in New Zealand, but it ended up having a global reach, ensuring adherence to proper social distancing rules in the early days of the pandemic. ■

