

# You can manage your covid-19 risk by setting your own ‘contact budget’

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by Carrie Arnold

*When it comes to covid-19, we all have different levels of risk we're comfortable with. Setting a weekly "contact budget" can make it easier to decide which risks are worth taking, says epidemiologist Eleanor Murray.*

**Carrie Arnold:** How did you come up with the idea of a contact budget for interactions with others during the coronavirus pandemic?

**Eleanor Murray:** Back in March and April, most people had clear guidance about what they were allowed to do, and it wasn't very much. That made life somewhat unpleasant, but it also made life easy. When things started opening up, everybody had to make their own decisions about what they are comfortable with and what might be risky.



The way I was thinking about it is that there is a level of risk I am comfortable with. If I go to a grocery store during a really crowded time, to keep my average risk level constant, I'm probably not going to do something risky the next day. We are all familiar with the idea of financial budgeting, it is easy to translate to this situation.

## How do we make a contact budget?

There are four metrics to keep in mind. First is how much risk you can tolerate. If you or someone in your household has a medical condition, then your tolerance is going to be lower.

Next is how comfortable you are knowing that you could get infected and transmit that infection. That's something we don't talk a lot about, but people have told me how guilty they felt afterwards.

The last two pieces are the amount of contact we need for our job and for our mental health.

If you are a healthcare worker or grocery store clerk, a certain amount of contacts are required as part of your job. Then there are contacts that you need for emotional reasons. It could be really important to you to deliver groceries to your elderly neighbour or to attend a religious service.

## What factors give an activity a higher risk or “cost”?

Think of person, place, time and space. “Person” is about how many people are there, and how many you are in regular contact with. The less regular contact you have, the more potential for expanding your infection network.

“Place” is about whether something is inside or outside, whether it is crowded, and the risks associated with that location.

“Time” is the duration you'll be there. And “space” is whether the location is well ventilated and how well you can maintain masks and physical distancing.

Whether necessary or optional, how do you make an activity as low risk as possible? Can you eat outside or get takeaway instead? Could you get the same benefit virtually?

## What if you blow your budget?

I remember friends who did Weight Watchers who would say they blew their diet so they're just going to eat whatever they want. That's the wrong way to think about this. It is better to realise that you spent a lot on a particular activity, and now you need to save up for more contact in the future.

You can also budget proactively. If it's really important to attend a friend's 30th birthday party, in the days before and after, you can make sure you are doing low-risk activities to average it out.