

Ask the Coronavirus Ethicist: Was It Ethical to Hit the Bars Last Weekend?

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By Karen Stohr

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Dear Coronavirus Ethicist,

Over the weekend, there was a lot of outrage on social media over the crowds gathered at DC bars, where people could unknowingly spread the virus. Most bars and restaurants in the DC region have since shut down, but was it unethical to go to a bar in the middle of a pandemic like this?

Dr. Karen Stohr, PhD, associate professor of philosophy at Georgetown University and senior research scholar at Georgetown's Kennedy Institute of Ethics:

Yes, it was unethical, although it's understandable. Socializing is a genuine human need, and social isolation poses real mental health risks for many people. Asking everyone to stay home is definitely asking for a sacrifice. But in the circumstances, it's a sacrifice that we're morally obligated to make. The key to appreciating this is learning to think of ourselves not as potential victims of Covid-19, but as potential vectors of it. You may feel invulnerable, but that doesn't mean that you get to expose other people to potential harm through your behavior. We have a moral obligation not to do things that put other people at unreasonable risk. That's true whether we're talking about speeding down Georgia Ave on a Saturday afternoon or going out to bars and restaurants during a pandemic. (Think of the bartenders and wait staff who had no choice but to show up to work in those crowded rooms.)

Public health experts have been saying for weeks that radically changing our behavior is the only way to prevent countless deaths. The math is clear and the sooner we start, the more lives will be saved. People who know this and go out to crowded bars anyway are being reckless with other people's lives. And it's no excuse to say that you haven't been keeping up with what's happening. It's possible to be "culpably ignorant," which is when you're at fault for not knowing something. We all have a moral responsibility to pay attention to the news right now and heed the pleas of public health experts and government officials. It shouldn't be necessary to call out the National Guard in order to get us to do what's right. So for now, practice your drinking songs from your balcony instead of your local bar.

If you have a question for the coronavirus ethicist, email lmullins@washingtonian.com.