

Can I have a picnic in the park with my friends? Is it wrong to take my mask off for a second or two while

I'm jogging? What should I do if I see someone breaking social distancing rules? As COVID-era rules begin to soften, but the virus is far from eradicated, it has become more difficult to know the answers to questions like these. While we've gotten used to a reality over the past couple months in which all social gatherings are banned, most activities are off-limits, and the answer to any question starting with "Can I" is more likely than not "no," we now have a little more freedom as the state begins to reopen—and with that freedom come some complicated decisions. As we try to balance our desires to go back out into the

world and to keep people safe, how do we make sure that we're acting ethically? We asked Andrea Vicini, an ethicist, physician, and theology professor at Boston College, to lay out the steps you need to follow to make thoughtful, ethical, and responsible decisions during the COVID pandemic. Step 1:

Gather as much information as you can. To make a good decision, Vicini says, it's crucial to start by listing out all the information you have and need. "Every time you make a decision, you need to acquire accurate, truthful, and tested information," Vicini says. In a normal context, the information you acquire before deciding whether or not you want to go out with your friends might be the location, who's going to be there, or how tired you are. In making a decision to go out today, however, you also need to gather

additional facts—am I experiencing any cold or flu-like symptoms? Would I be breaking any laws or going against the advice of my local leaders? Are COVID cases in my area rising? What does the latest

COVID research have to say about the safety of the activity I want to partake in? Step 2: Identify the additional individuals impacted by your decision. Of course, you're not dealing with your COVID dilemma

in a vacuum. If you're thinking about whether or not to visit your grandmother for her birthday, for example, your grandmother and any other relatives who may be in attendance will be greatly affected by

your decision, as will the employees on the public transit you might take to get to your grandmother's house. You should think especially about "those who are helping society to continue to work, and those who are in positions of greater vulnerability than you," Vicini says. Step 3: Identify your goal. Before you

get lost thinking through specifics, it's worth pausing to ask yourself: What is it that you're actually trying to accomplish here? If you're turning over the question of whether you should attend a not-socially-

distanced party your parents are throwing, ask yourself why you want to attend—is it because you want to get out of the house? Because you want to cultivate the relationship you have with your parents?

Because you want to show up your siblings? Once you've identified your goal, you may discover that actually, "your goal can be fulfilled in many ways," Vicini says. Step 4: List your possible choices and

their consequences. Once you've identified a well-informed goal, it's time to actually develop some potential courses of action and imagine their consequences. Maybe you scrolled past a picture of

someone having a big party on social media, and you've identified that your goal is to educate them so they make better choices in the future. You may find yourself questioning the right way to respond,

whether your instinct is to post a snarky comment, message them privately, or avoid conflict altogether. For the record, Vicini advises that "opening a dialogue" is almost always the ethical choice when you're

facing people who seem to be disregarding COVID protocols. As you list your options, think about the likely outcomes they will bring: Posting a snarky comment might be the most effective way of getting

someone's attention, but you might start a comment war. Doing nothing is the simplest option, but it

doesn't serve your goal of deterring this person from hosting dangerous parties. Weighing all your options and consequences is a complicated process. To help guide your thinking, Vicini says, a good guiding principle is to ask yourself: Which choices will allow the most people to flourish? In the age of COVID, those choices are often the ones that prioritize protecting individuals' health. "Health allows for personal and social flourishing, so it's a precondition for many other values we treasure," Vicini says.

Step 5: Do a gut check. Making ethical decisions "is not only a rational process," Vicini says. "It's also an emotional one." While you can reason through all your choices and consequences, it's best if you can let your decision marinate before committing. "Make a hypothetical decision, and then sit with it; do not act on it immediately," Vicini advises. "Wait to see if you feel confirmation within yourself about that decision. If you begin to feel uncertainty or doubt, you might want to reconsider." What would someone you respect say about your choice? How would you feel if your decision were made public? Would you be able to defend the decision you've made? If the answers to these questions don't sit quite right with you, you may need to revisit some of those other options.

Step 6: Make the decision. It's time! Visit grandma. Politely suggest that your parents move their party outdoors and cut the guest list. **Shame your friends via Instagram DM.**

Step 7: Take time to reflect. That's right: The ethical decision-making process doesn't simply end with you making a decision. After you've attended the socially distanced party or shed your mask at a picnic with friends, take time for some good old critical introspection. "Don't simply turn the page," Vicini says. "Think about the next situation in which you'll find yourself. Think about what you learned from this process. Did you make the right decision, or the wrong decision?" The fact of the matter is that we're going to have to keep making tough decisions as the pandemic continues to complicate every aspect of our lives—so it's definitely worth taking some time to hone your ethical decision-making skills.