

A DEADLY VIRUS.  
A WORLD ON ITS KNEES.  
A RACE TO SAVE HUMANITY.



A FILM BY DAVID FRANCE

**HBO** ORIGINAL

# HOW TO SURVIVE A PANDEMIC

NEW DOCUMENTARY  
STREAMING MAR 29

**HBO**max™

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

# HOW TO SURVIVE A PANDEMIC

## Introduction

Thank you for sharing **HOW TO SURVIVE A PANDEMIC** with your community. This guide is designed to navigate you through a conversation about your thoughts, questions, and reactions to the film. It contains information about the film, resources for further learning, and discussion questions to deepen your understanding.

## About the film

From Academy Award® nominated director David France (*How to Survive a Plague*, *Welcome to Chechnya* and *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson*), **HOW TO SURVIVE A PANDEMIC** is an eye-opening feature-length documentary that takes an exclusive look at the massive global undertaking to research, develop, regulate and roll out the COVID-19 vaccine in the war against the worldwide pandemic.

The film begins in early 2020 when the coronavirus leapt all borders, and follows researchers into their labs, investigators as they conduct trials involving millions of volunteers, and regulators in their lockdown offices as death tolls mount and political pressures grow brutal. Continuing throughout 2021 as the vaccines show promise, the film charts the towering obstacles, sharp disputes, and systemic injustices that threaten to leave most of the world wanting or wishing for vaccines – and watching powerlessly as more-deadly variants develop. The hope of a return to normalcy was pushed further and further down the line.

With unparalleled access to the most prominent actors in this colossal effort, from bench scientists to major pharmaceuticals, government agencies, and frontline workers, this is the historic chronicle of one of the most consequential undertakings of our lifetimes, where towering achievements in science collide with the geopolitical realities of desperation, greed, and nationalism.

**HOW TO SURVIVE A PANDEMIC** premiered on HBO Max on March 29, 2022. Find more information about the film at [SurviveAPandemicHBO.com](https://www.surviveapandemic.com).

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# Director's statement

Covid-19 is my second pandemic – third, if you also count polio, which was conquered just before I was born but whose victims were all around in my early years, their injuries haunting my dreams. HIV is my first and most formative pandemic. That viral thug hit the streets of New York the same year I did, 1981, which was also the year I came out, putting us on a collision course. The disease stole away friends and lovers but somehow I outmaneuvered it. Yet I was fully engaged with AIDS – not as a frontline activist but as an investigative journalist looking for answers, looking for hope. It is scarcely possible to convey what it was like over the 15 years between 1981 and 1996 – 15 years! – when there was not one effective medication against HIV. Then, finally, pharmaceutical breakthroughs stopped the dying. But not for everybody. Horribly, it took another decade for those drugs to reach sub-Saharan Africa, the pandemic's white-hot epicenter. This is the worst horror of the AIDS pandemic – worse than the virus was the indifference and greed. We allowed tens of millions of people to die of what was suddenly a survivable infection.

I thought of this immediately when I first read about our new pandemic. In January 2020 scientists everywhere got to work. I knew many of them, as most were veterans of HIV research. Their confidence was comforting – and not misplaced: In just 11 months they accomplished the most remarkable scientific achievement in history, propelling a transnational vaccine “moon shot” program that produced multiple highly effective vaccines. I got to work covering them. And I hoped against hope that this time their scientific accomplishment would be matched by the political and corporate will to do the right thing globally.

How would history judge us now? How would we survive \*this\* pandemic? What have we learned?

- David France

# Discussion questions

## COVID-19:

“We cannot say this loudly enough: all countries can still change the course of this pandemic.”

- Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, [World Health Organization](#)

1. After reading the director’s statement, reflect on France’s closing words and give your response to his questions: How would history judge what we are doing now in response to the pandemic? How will we survive \*this\* pandemic? What have we learned?
2. Health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic expose public health challenges in underserved communities and the need for new infrastructure that puts an emphasis on community health and wellbeing, specifically amongst underserved communities and communities of color. How have you seen these inequities represented in your own community, work, or personal life?
3. **The Social Change Ecosystem** describes roles that we can each play in movements and systems for good. To discuss how individuals in your community stepped up during the pandemic, review these roles and the reflection activity in Deepa Iyer’s **Mapping Our Roles in Social Change Ecosystems**.
  - 3.1. Discuss the film’s portrayal of the different roles that individuals played during the pandemic: clinical trial participants; scientists working to make the vaccine; journalists covering developing stories. What role in the social change ecosystem did they play? What role did you play? *Examples could include terms from the Social Change Ecosystem Guide, or more generally speaking, how you identify: teacher, nurse, parent, frontline workers, general public, etc.*
4. **Wellcome** is a leading global charitable foundation supporting science to solve the urgent health challenges facing everyone, and their **recent report** details the unfortunate inequity in global vaccine distribution. The film examines these challenges and the discrepancies that still exist in vaccine rollout on the global scale.
  - 4.1. Were you surprised at the amount of time and logistics that went into vaccine delivery to much of the global south?
  - 4.2. We have seen that variants like Delta and Omicron are able to adapt and thrive in communities without vaccine access. In addition to the moral and humane considerations that support equitable distribution of the vaccine, there is a clear risk/benefit argument to be made. Which type of messaging would you find more compelling in appealing for wider vaccine distribution?



## COMMUNITY SUPPORT:

*“Every individual must be involved in the fight. The worst is yet to come if we don’t rush to ensure unity.”*  
- Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, [World Health Organization](#)

1. Public health workers around the world have been on the front lines of health crises for decades, and will be there caring for communities in the crises to come. Are there health workers close to you? How can you support the work they do for us every day?
2. The film follows community outreach members in Pittsburgh as they take action to control community spread. Make a list of the resources your community has available to control community spread - or alternatively, resources that you wish were available.
3. How have you seen your community come together to ensure unity during or before the pandemic?
4. Are there situations where you wished they could have come together differently or earlier?
5. As we saw in the film, COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access, aka **COVAX**, is a worldwide initiative aimed at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. Its goal was to “ensure that the race for vaccines is a collaboration, not a contest.” Describe a moment or situation where you or your community were able to work together to frame a difficult situation as a “collaboration, not a contest.”

## MENTAL HEALTH:

*“As disease rips through a community, there’s pain that the disease leaves in its wake. We just cannot ignore it. This has changed everything.”*

- Father Paul Abernathy, [Neighborhood Resilience Project](#)

1. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your mental health?
2. Have you developed coping strategies or found resources to uplift and support your own mental health?
3. The pandemic has traumatized entire communities, including an outsized impact on underserved communities. How do you think this trauma impacts the health and wellbeing of the people living in these places?
4. The researchers in the film describe feeling like “the pressure of the world came down on us” as the pandemic worsened and the quest for a vaccine became even more important. Whether you have experienced the pandemic as a frontline worker, healthcare worker, journalist, parent, child, friend, etc., discuss some of the unique “pressures of the world” that you have felt targeted by.
5. The pandemic has been present in our lives for more than two years. As we look to the year ahead, what gives you hope?

# Actions & resources

In the film, Father Paul Abernathy of [Neighborhood Resilience Project](#) describes the path to “going back to normal” in three parts: combating the spread of COVID-19, responding to basic needs in our communities, and supporting mental health within our communities. Find action items and resources for further learning within these three categories below. We encourage you to discuss how you could take action as individuals or a community after your screening.

## **Combat and learn about the spread of COVID-19:**

As we look ahead to the next leg of our fight against the pandemic, it can be helpful and cathartic to first look at how far we’ve come. Visit [UC Health’s COVID-19 dashboard](#) to find a COVID tracker following vaccine distribution alongside resources for further learning.

The U.S. government has made free tests available for every household: request your tests and find more info [here](#).

The AAPI COVID-19 project is a collective research project examining the ongoing COVID-19 crisis as it shapes the lives of Asians, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in the United States. Learn about their research and how you can get involved [here](#).

Join UNICEF’s [Interfaith Movement to End the Pandemic](#) and make an impact in your community. Use the [interfaith movement one-pager](#) to take action in-person or online and hear more about how faith organizations are coming together.

Getting vaccinated is the best action we can take as individuals to combat the spread of COVID-19, but many people are understandably hesitant. If you or a loved one feels conflicted about getting vaccinated, visit the [Vaccine Confidence Project](#) for tools to support your learning, and inform your decision making.

World Health Organization (WHO)’s [resource page](#) includes advice and information on ways to protect yourself and prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, has helped vaccinate almost half the world’s children against deadly and debilitating infectious diseases as part of its mission to save lives and protect people’s health by increasing equitable and sustainable use of vaccines. They are currently co-leading global efforts on equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines - find out how you can support [here](#).

We all have questions and concerns as we navigate this pandemic. As the dangerous Delta, Lambda, and Omicron variants continue to spread, it is important now, more than ever, to take all precautions to protect yourself and your community. Get the information you need to protect yourself and your community at NAACP’s [Covid Know More Hub](#).

Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center is dedicated to the elimination of cancer and related diseases, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, they developed a robust program focused on COVID-19, including treatment trials, observational studies, and vaccine trials. Access their research & highlights to learn more about their work [here](#).

### Discover and respond to basic needs in the community:

National Association of County and City Health Officials' Health Equity and Social Justice program advances the capacity of local health departments to confront the root causes of inequities. Access NACCHO's searchable database of Health Equity tools in their [Toolkit](#).

The Neighborhood Resilience Project is a framework that establishes and promotes resilient healing and healthy communities so that people can be healthy enough to sustain opportunity and realize their potential. Learn how to get involved in or start a chapter in your community [here](#).

Underserved communities often do not have equal access to healthcare and resources. Find resources and more information about how you can support equal health for all at [LGBT HealthLink](#), which works to improve the health of the LGBTQ+ community by eliminating health disparities.

Find volunteer opportunities in your community, like helping essential workers do household chores, running errands, looking after their children, and more via [Points of Light](#)

### Support the mental health of the community:

Visit [Made Of Million's COVID-19 hub](#) to find tips for handling anxiety, resources to get help, and breathing exercises to manage stress.

Only [one in three Black adults](#) who need mental health care receive it. Find information, resources, and help at [Mental Health America's BIPOC Mental Health Center](#).

Mental health for students has become a major problem during the pandemic, with limited support. An impact report from [Our Turn](#) found that 65% of students' mental health has worsened since COVID-19 began. Read their full report and find additional resources [here](#).

Find mental health resources and tips at The Mental Health Coalition's [free resource library](#). Also, [find actionable ways](#) to support your community (and yourself!)

### Join the conversation on social media:

Hashtag: [#HowToSurviveAPandemic](#)

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