

Cindy Elmore, Ph.D., is a professor in the School of Communication at East Carolina University.

"Would you mind wearing a mask?"

That's what I had to ask my hairstylist of 17 years at my appointment this morning. This was my second visit back to her since May, when I first ventured out to get a haircut after 10 months without one. At that time, my longtime hairdresser had worn a mask and happily said she was doing self-testing.

Given what I knew about her, I assumed she was probably not vaccinated, so her nearby box full of self-testing kits made me happy. My hunch was reaffirmed a couple weeks later when I saw her long Facebook post asking people to respect other people's health choices and never ask about anyone else's vaccine status. No one would post such a message if they had been vaccinated.

Now back at my hairdresser's this morning, she questioned why I wanted her to wear a mask. I said I thought she was not vaccinated, and she replied that she had not publicly disclosed whether she was or wasn't.

"Then I have to assume you aren't," I said quietly, thinking to myself about her three children and the considerable evidence on Facebook of hers and their wide social circles and active social lives.

My hairdresser was clearly offended. "I'll wear it for you this time, but that's the last time," she said.

I swallowed hard and explained that I wear a mask to protect other people. This is true, though I believe she probably thought my comment sanctimonious.

She replied that she just didn't like being told to wear a mask, to which I responded, "That's why I asked if you would mind."

What followed was one of the most forced and awkward conversations of my life. I'm pretty sure a conversation only happened at all because I asked about her children. Luckily, I just needed a trim, and our visit was over in less than 10 minutes. I did not make a return appointment, though I'm still shaken and saddened by the experience.

I like my hairdresser. She's like the dentist who verbally entertains while she works, which is great for an introvert like me. She cuts, colors and styles with an eager rundown of her children and extended family, usually providing me with a very different slice of life than the people I'm close to. For 17 years I've heard steady reports on her children, from toddler indulgences through high school loves, bringing to life the framed photos that decorate the walls and corner tables of her hair salon.

I hate what happened today. I hate feeling as though I'm probably giving up a long-term relationship, even though it was not one that extended beyond my transactional hair needs. I hate the misinformation about the vaccines and that not enough people will be vaccinated in time to stave off ever-new variants in what seems to be a never-ending ordeal. I hate that this pandemic has divided the "haves" from the "have-nots" for an all new reason beyond what has always divided haves and have-nots in this country.

Yet, my Johnson & Johnson vaccine is less effective against the growing delta variant, and Pitt County, where I live, has just a 39% vaccination rate.

So I can't pretend everything is OK. There's still a pandemic, and the vaccine rate seems practically moribund. New variants are highly contagious and finding willing hosts. The long-term effects of COVID-19 are not known.

A friend thinks I'm over-worrying. Am I exacting my own individual retribution against those who won't join in on the national response we need to protect everyone and end this thing? I guess I am.

But on the other hand, so is my hairdresser. She doesn't want to get vaccinated and she doesn't want to wear a mask. She made it clear she won't do so again.

Yes, she's making her own decision about her own risk. But in a highly contagious pandemic that keeps changing, isn't she also making that decision for me? And for others?

I'm not as scared as I used to be, and I'm out and about seeing family and friends, who I know are vaccinated. But where I don't have to share in the close-up riskiness of others, I won't. Despite 17 years of happy haircuts.