The 21/90 rule is not a rule I have been familiar with. It is the premise that it takes 21 days to make a new habit and 90 days for it to become a permanent lifestyle change. That is not to say that I am not familiar with trying to break old habits and make new ones. We have all done it.

Trying to stop biting your nails, stop snacking, drink less soda, stop swearing, or stop smoking. Or starting new habits like do dishes after each meal instead of letting them pile up, get up early every day to exercise, eat more vegetables, improve your golf swing, or call your mother every Sunday. No matter what it is, it takes practice to make it a habit. It doesn’t just happen overnight. But how long does it take?

As it turns out, there are differing opinions. It can take 18-254 days to form a new habit. The time frame is wide due to definitions of starting a new habit and the habit becoming a routine part of what you do, something you no longer think about. It also has to do with how often it is done, why it is done and how important it is to you.

I was recently at a meeting in a large room, tables spread apart, everyone seated 6-10 feet apart. I asked a question and another participant walked over, within a foot of me, and shared a picture on a computer screen to explain the answer. Without thinking, I backed away, to reestablish the six feet of distance and put my mask in place. Masking and physically distancing has become my new normal. From the beginning of the pandemic, I have been getting up and going to work. So, since the middle of March, I have been wearing a mask every day, everywhere I go. It is my new habit.

There are those that have told me in public settings, “you don’t have to wear the mask, I trust you.” I’ll take that as a compliment. Trust is a hard thing to earn. I am glad they feel I would be doing the right thing to protect myself and others. But, they do not know who I have been exposed to every day, just as I do not know who they have been exposed to every day. We can be contagious with COVID-19 for days prior to having symptoms, thereby unintentionally exposing others. Many will have mild to moderate symptoms if they get ill, but some will become critically ill, and we do not know what determines whom that will be.

So, we wear masks. We physically distance. We wash our hands more often.

Wearing a mask is the easy one. Put it on and go. The more often you wear it, the less uncomfortable it is, the better it fits. As humans, we are imitators. When we see someone doing something, we want to do it too. Wearing a mask reminds others to wear one. It makes it easier for others to do it comfortably and reminds us all of the importance of it.
Washing your hands for 20 seconds is also a new habit that takes time to relearn. We have all watched children get sent back to the sink to “wash your hands”, watched them run them under water and heard “I’m done!”. Have you timed yourself? Wash with soap for 20 seconds and rinse with water for 10 seconds? Singing “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” is 20 seconds, or the “Alphabet song” with the “next time won’t you sing with me” at the end, is 20 seconds. Get those hands good and soapy, a single squirt of soap will do, the water and rubbing it together will do the rest. Interlace the fingers, rub them back and forth, get both sides of the hands, front and back, and the fingertips rubbed into the palms. Then rinse just as aggressively. Viruses and bacteria need both the soap and the water to rinse, to be eradicated.

Physical distancing has probably been the hardest one to learn. It takes constant concentration. Needing to be aware of your surroundings and those around you all of the time. It would be easier if we all had invisible shields that would have a warning system like the back up beepers in our vehicles…beep beep beep! It takes being mindful of our surroundings and remembering how far germs can fly through the air, even with masks on. How do we judge six feet? Roughly, two arm lengths can be a guide. So if you stick out your arm and the other person does the same toward you, if the arms or hands touch, you are too close.

So, hang in there. Like every new habit that is good for us, it takes time to incorporate it into our “normal”. But it can be done. It is worth it to keep each other safe. To keep one more grandmother alive and able to see their new grandchild. To keep one more dad alive and able to walk someone down the aisle. To keep our economy open and growing. This is a team effort and it may be the most important team you will ever be on. And like with all teams, we have to practice to get it right.

Remember, we are in this together.