

## INSIGHT

# Who's normal anyway? I'm not, neither are you.

## Questioning norms during the lack of normality

By Alyssa Pierce

Living through a pandemic, we question what the “new normal” will be. Was there ever an “old normal”? Where do we go from here? Living with the unknown is stressful. We grab onto anything that may give us comfort in order to forget what is going on in this crazy world. But the unknown also offers an opportunity for us to define a “new normal” and to question the ideas and constructs we once lived by.

### Can we think differently?

Being a designer, I would like to focus this discussion on design. How can we look at design through a “think differently” lens? It won't be easy to throw out ideas that we've clung to in the past but if that is ever going to happen, this feels like the right time. Like it or not, the world has changed. We should ask ourselves if our thinking can change with it. Rather than focus on how to design for Covid-19, let's turn our attention to the people around us. Ask them, “If the canvas is wiped clean, what do you need?” They might not have an immediate answer, but that opportunity to explore, without any preconceived ideas, may open doors to a different “normal” — maybe even a better “normal.”

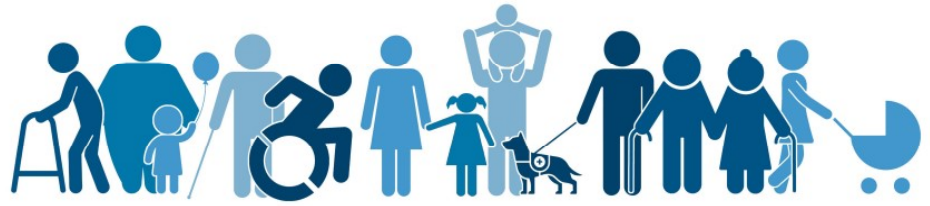
### None of us are “normal”

We are all unique. We are all different. Every single one of us has different qualities and abilities that make this world we live in dynamic and fascinating. If we accept how perfectly imperfect and unique we all are, why do we try to design for only one kind of “normal” rather than focusing on designing with empathy and designing for all? In the article, “The Power of Having a Voice: Empathy and Courage,” Debbie Gregory speaks to the idea of exploring the

unknown and listening to people we may have not heard before. When designers listen to these voices and feel the words they hear, they empathize and produce design that embraces equity and inclusivity. To accommodate human diversity, there should be design diversity. As the world will always be changing, the ability to solve problems in a way that addresses a variety of needs and situations is the true essence of explorative design and person-centered design.



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### Noncompliant Bodies

Joel Sanders, a professor at Yale with an architectural practice in New York City, has coined the term “noncompliant bodies” to describe people whose needs are not met by designs for those who embody dominant cultural norms. If you don’t fit into that norm and you are a “noncompliant body,” are you just expected to deal with it? Designing for “normal” impacts people and can make life more difficult for users who don’t fit the mold. Designers must be sensitive to how their design impacts everyone. Sanders has also studied restrooms and notes that toilets are segregated by gender identity as the result of men’s and women’s social roles in Victorian times rather than any biological imperative. Our world has changed quite a bit in just the last twelve months, let alone since the Victorian era, yet are we still allowing outdated social constructs to dictate our way of life?

### Sources:

“The Power of Having a Voice: Empathy and Courage” by Debbie Gregory  
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### Selfish Design

This brings me to the idea of selfish design. When we are selfish, we place ourselves at the center of the world and think only about how a situation impacts us and how it may benefit us. Selfishness has a negative connotation, but what if we become selfish thinkers for others? If I embrace the idea of being selfish for the user, the design is about them, it is only about them, and I want every aspect of the design to benefit them. I can advocate for the user by being selfish for them. We must think differently. This feels like the time to start with a clean canvas and think about the way things should be, not how they were. Perhaps the “new normal” can come from thinking differently and unselfishly; addressing the future and not living in the past.



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