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How to convince people to comply with health recommendations during COVID-19 outbreak

Letter to Editor

The current situation is exceptional in terms of a social and economic crisis that the entire world is facing (Karwowski et al., 2020; Sorokowski et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, it is in everyone's best interest to contain the further spread of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). This may be achieved by complying with the recommendations of doctors and experts, such as maintaining social distancing. However, one does not need to look far for examples of violations of coronavirus health recommendations (Horowitz & Bubola, 2020; Jones, 2020). So the question arises, why do some people choose not to comply, and critically, how can we effectively convey messages and convince people to actually listen to health advice? The answer to this question seems particularly important for you, Readers and Authors, who, as scientists, doctors, officials, and experts, often appear in the media and give advice, and by doing so, have the greatest opportunity to appeal to the public (Abu-Akel et al., 2020). Indeed, with knowledge on increasing persuasiveness of communications, you may not only be heard, but also be listened to.

1) Not 'must', but 'should'

According to Ryan and Deci's (Ryan & Deci, 2017) self-determination theory, the most effective form of communication is one that supports autonomy. Many studies have confirmed the effectiveness of adopting such an approach. For instance, during the outbreak of H1N1, autonomy-supportive instructions, that is, those highlighting personal values and explaining the rationale for the desired behavior, resulted in the highest intention to comply with recommendations when compared with a group who received

instructions in a controlling style, highlighting punishment in the case of non-compliance, and including imperative mode verbs, such as ‘must’ (Chan et al. 2015).

2) ‘We’, not ‘You’

When considering the effectiveness of messages, one should take into account the importance of the fact that the message is conveyed by a member of ‘our’ group. For instance, Fielding et al. (2020) showed that the most persuasive spokespersons in changing attitudes toward climate change were ingroup messengers. This effect was even more pronounced when the messengers referred to important group values. We should, then, speak united (as ‘we’), without dividing the society into, for instance, elders and young ones (‘we and them’), and refer to essential values, such as life preservation.

3) Our moral duty

Previous studies provided evidence that referring to moral grounds (such as, in the present situation, ‘it is moral to maintain social-distancing’) is highly effective in persuasion (with regard to COVID-19) (Everett et al., 2020). It may thus be effective to underscore duties and responsibilities toward family, friends, and fellow citizens, rather than focusing on negative prognoses of a further spread of the virus (Lunn et al., 2020). However, a recent preprint study (Blagov, 2020) provided evidence that such communicates may not be effective for persons with certain types of personalities (i.e., psychopathy, meanness, and disinhibition).

4) We can achieve it

Numerous studies highlight the need for self-agency and feelings of being in control (Cheng & Ng, 2006). A strong belief in one’s ability to have control over life events plays a major role in confronting crises and coping with stress (Lefcourt, 1992). What is more, SARS-Preventive Behaviors were shown to be positively linked with perceived behavioral control (Cheng & Ng, 2006). Hence, building self-confidence in one’s own capabilities to have an impact on the transmission of the virus may be beneficial not only for the public psychological well-being, but also for increasing public compliance with health recommendations.

5) We are proud of...

Appealing to emotions is a powerful weapon, as emotions can have direct consequences on behavior, but, at the same time, evoking intense negative emotions can easily backfire. Thus, as dire messages may lead to lower levels of engagement and concern (Feinberg & Willer, 2011). On the other hand, in recent studies published as preprints, greater levels of worry predicted more responsible COVID-19 behaviors among Croatians (Erceg et al., 2020), Netherlands (Mertens et al., 2020) and Swiss citizens (Abu-Akel et al., 2020). However, the authors themselves (Mertens et al., 2020) cautioned against using media messages to induce more fear in the general public. Furthermore, more positive emotions, such as gratitude, pride, and hope, are also linked to a greater change in prosocial behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006), and may be used in convincing people to adhere.

In conclusion, establishing the best methods for persuading people of what to do and what not to do seems to be one of the greatest challenges in the current, extraordinary situation. Some have indicated that the rapid escalation of the virus may have been due to the inefficiency of public announcements and communication (Van Bavel et al., 2020). Finding specific, even small amendments of public messages that could improve overall adherence even by a small percentage, could translate into thousands of lives saved. ■

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