

# Be clear, positive, and targeted, to help public stick to social distancing, governments urged

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Clear, positive, messaging that is segmented by age, culture, and geography is key to helping the public stick to social distancing measures to stop the spread of Covid-19 infection, say behavioural experts in a

commentary accepted for publication in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

Messaging that is authoritarian and/or punitive in tone and socially divisive will have the opposite effect, say the nine authors, led by Professor Chris Bonell of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

As the prospect of lockdown easing draws closer, and in the absence of other hard evidence on how best to curb the spread of COVID-19, they set out a series of 11 key communication principles that are informed by a body of behavioural science and the study of other infections, such as SARS and MERS.

These principles, which aim to guide governments on how to help people stick to [social distancing](#) measures, "could ensure that interventions are more likely to achieve their intended outcomes and less likely to generate unintended consequences," they suggest.

The 11 principles are:

- Clear and specific guidance
- 'Protect each other'
- 'Stand together'
- 'This is who we are'
- Avoid messages based on fear or disgust
- Avoid authoritarian messages
- Make a plan and review it regularly
- 'Make it possible '
- Style of messaging
- Theory of change
- Co-design

First and foremost, information by itself won't always secure mass behaviour change, say the authors. But it's still important and, crucially, the public needs clear, specific, and consistent guidance on exactly what behaviours they need to adopt for social distancing.

Messaging needs to focus on the importance of how behaviour change protects everyone, including the most vulnerable, key workers, and loved ones. And it should include concrete examples, powerful images, and the actual voices of those most in need of protection.

A one size fits all approach will fail to recognise the impact of age, income, and ethnicity on the sacrifices required to stick to social distancing rules, advise the authors.

And "'Protect yourself' messages will have limited overall impact among the general public because many consider themselves at low risk of severe consequences from COVID-19 infection and are unlikely to be persuaded otherwise," they note.

The 'stand together' principle emphasises membership of groups, from families to nation, but all linked by a sense of duty, solidarity, and inclusion, irrespective of creed or culture.

Messages should come from trusted peers, including [social media influencers](#) and celebrities, rather than from those regarded as partisan or self interested. And it's worth tailoring them by age, gender, cultural beliefs, and geography, suggest the authors.

The 'This is who we are' principle draws on the informal rules ([social norms](#)) that govern group culture and behaviour, but [messaging](#) should avoid focusing on undesirable behaviours, such as 'don't panic buy' or 'don't bend the rules.'

Messaging should avoid invoking fear or disgust at others' behaviour and not adopt an authoritarian tone. "Messages based on coercion and authority can in some circumstances achieve large changes in the short term, but can be hard to sustain in the longer term," the authors point out.

Plans are important because they help people anticipate what helps and hinders committing to social distancing, while carrots, such as financial and mental health support and opening up green spaces, are more effective than sticks, such as punishment and fines.

Messaging should be communicated through professionally designed and appealing mass media and social media campaigns, focusing on the positive and inclusivity.

And each campaign should be regarded as an intervention, with clearly defined objectives and reach, informed by the evidence and principles of behavioural change. And it should consider the potential for unintended consequences.

And lastly, interventions should be designed and piloted with members of the public and properly evaluated so that the learning can be taken on board for the future, say the authors.

**More information:** Commentary: Harnessing behavioural science in public health campaigns to maintain 'social distancing' in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: key principles, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.1136/jech-2020-214290](https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2020-214290)

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