

DIY contact tracing interview tool could disrupt spread of COVID-19

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FIU Global Forensic and Justice Center - CogTracer video Credit: Florida International University

Psychologists have developed a do-it-yourself tool that uses "the science of memory" to improve the ability to remember more contacts during the contact tracing process.

After testing positive for COVID-19, a person is typically advised to report who they've recently been in contact with, so those individuals can be notified of their exposure. Remembering every single person can be very difficult.

The team of [psychologists](#), with expertise in [memory](#), cognition and investigative interviewing, have launched the new web-based contact tracing [tool](#)—called CogTracer—as a free way for people in the community help to slow the spread of COVID-19.

"We developed this tool based on recent research we've conducted on the best ways to conduct contact tracing interviews," said FIU psychologist Deborah Goldfarb, who helped create CogTracer. "We think of it as a DIY contact tracing tool, because it allows you to do your own contact tracing on your own time from the privacy of your home."

CogTracer is not a replacement for the contact tracing interviews conducted by local health departments. Instead, it's designed to empower people and allow them to quickly take personal responsibility for their contacts and communities. The tool helps provide prompts that aid with remembering. For example, it asks users to visualize themselves in certain places and provides 'clues' or association words, such as 'baby,' 'exercise,' 'rest,' and 'uncomfortable' to help people list more names. CogTracer asks users to write down a list of names, which the tool's developers encourage people to share with local health officials.

"The earlier on you can identify who you've been in contact with, the sooner you can reach out to them so they can self-isolate and help slow the spread," said FIU psychologist Jacqueline R. Evans, who also helped develop CogTracer. "But, remembering can be a challenging task—and the more difficult the memory task, the more important it is to provide effective cues to improve recall."

Evans and Goldfarb, FIU psychologist Ronald Fisher and a researcher from Iowa State University, received an NSF Rapid Response grant and wanted to understand how to apply the 'science of memory'—or cognitive interviewing techniques—to the contact tracing process. Helping people remember more names or even descriptions of people

they have been around could help make contact tracing more efficient and effective.

Effective contact tracing relies on recalling a complete list of one's contacts. The problem is that those prior interactions are stored in our memory—and getting to that memory relies on asking the right questions, the right way.

Evans' previous research has pointed toward the cognitive interview as an effective way to increase the number of contacts remembered during contact tracing. Originally developed by FIU psychologist Ronald Fisher, this technique is considered by many to be the gold standard in investigative interviewing.

Cognitive interview techniques are different from a standard contact tracing interview, where someone is simply asked to list their contacts with minimal follow-up prompts. Cognitive interviews dive deeper. For example, the interviewee might be asked to close their eyes to improve concentration, as well as to mentally place themselves back in a particular time and place.

The first half of the NSF-funded study tested whether the number of contacts varied depending on whether the [interview](#) was conducted over the phone or through an online survey. The team is currently examining the findings. The second half of the study begins this fall and will examine whether memory can be improved across different age ranges. This grant is being funded through FIU's Global Forensic and Justice Center.

"We hope this tool empowers individuals to recall their own contacts and also reach out to those contacts and play an important role in helping stop the spread of the pandemic," Goldfarb said.

More information: cogtracer.wixsite.com/cogtracer

Provided by Florida International University

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