

Empathy prevents COVID-19 spreading

October 13 2020



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Empathy for vulnerable people in risk groups motivates us to use face masks and keep our distance, so that we help to prevent the spread of COVID-19, according to the study, which has just been published in the journal *Psychological Science*.

"We show that [empathy](#) for the most vulnerable is an important factor, and that it can be used actively to combat the pandemic. I believe that [policy makers](#) can use our [new knowledge](#) in their efforts to get more people to follow the guidelines—and ultimately save lives," says Stefan Pfattheicher, an associate professor at the Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences at Aarhus BSS, Aarhus University.

Pfattheicher is heading the study in which researchers have initially tested the relationship between participants' empathy and their attitude to social distancing. They tested this in two questionnaire-based studies in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. For example, on a scale from 1 to 5, participants were asked how concerned they are about those who are most vulnerable to the coronavirus. Subsequently, they were asked about the extent to which they themselves avoid social contact due to the coronavirus. The relationship is clear. The higher the degree of empathy, the greater the focus on reducing social contact.

Equally importantly, the study shows that it is possible to induce empathy among people, and thereby also make more people willing to keep social distance and wear face masks.

Real people induce empathy

In two experiments, the researchers tested the differences in participants' willingness to follow the two recommendations, depending on whether they are just informed about the effect of the two initiatives, or whether they are also presented with a vulnerable person. In the two experiments, the participants were presented with people who, each in their own way, have been affected by and suffer from the coronavirus. There were also control groups who only received information about the effect of keeping social distance and wearing face masks. And the conclusion is clear: The participants who received the story about people suffering from the coronavirus reported a higher degree of empathy. And also a

greater willingness to physically distance and use [face masks](#).

"Our results suggest that we need stories of [real people](#) suffering. It's not enough just to tell us that we must keep a distance and wear a face mask for the sake of vulnerable citizens in general. If we're confronted with a specific person who is vulnerable to COVID-19, it is clear that empathy is strengthened, and that we are more likely to follow the guidelines," says Stefan Pfattheicher.

"Our clear recommendation is that policy makers incorporate this knowledge using empathy in their communication initiatives," says Michael Bang Petersen, a professor at the Department of Political Science, and co-author of the scientific article.

More information: Stefan Pfattheicher et al, The Emotional Path to Action: Empathy Promotes Physical Distancing and Wearing of Face Masks During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Psychological Science* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797620964422](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620964422)

Provided by Aarhus University

Citation: Empathy prevents COVID-19 spreading (2020, October 13) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-10-empathy-covid-.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--