

How to motivate people to comply voluntarily with pandemic restrictions

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An effective response to a pandemic like the COVID-19 will only be successful if people voluntarily follow the rules and guidelines of decision-makers and experts. Many of the required measures, such as

avoiding social contact and significantly changing our daily habits require a strong commitment. Other necessary actions, such as regular hand washing, are often impossible to monitor and enforce. Adherence to the guidelines thus depends on people's personal commitment.

The ability of policy makers and experts to communicate convincingly to citizens has a strong influence on whether people voluntarily motivate themselves to change their behavior and maintain new behaviors.

Based on a large body of existing research, four leading researchers of self-determination theory, Frank Martela (Aalto University), Nelli Hankonen (University of Helsinki), Richard M. Ryan (Australian Catholic University) and Maarten Vansteenkiste (Universiteit Gent) have crystallized 13 [communication](#) principles to foster voluntary compliance in a crisis such as COVID-19. The communication principles have been approved for publication in the *European Review of Social Psychology*.

What is needed: Improving justification and understanding

According to the researchers, the coronavirus related communications of Finnish politicians and officials have been relatively calm and neutral in its tone, and have wisely appealed to people's sense of responsibility and solidarity. Still, there's room for improvement in clarifying the arguments to increase the public's understanding.

'At times, the communication of policy makers and experts has not been very transparent, and there hasn't been enough clarity about the assessments and research on which the recommendations are based. This creates unnecessary rumors and counter-arguments,' says Frank Martela, a postdoctoral researcher at Aalto University.

'I'm not sure how widely citizens initially understood why, for example, asymptomatic people should use face masks. In order for people to make sensible choices in their daily lives, they need to understand the mechanisms of spreading and controlling the disease. In order to optimize communications, we would need up-to-date information on what are the most serious misunderstandings or concerns of citizens,' assistant professor Nelli Hankonen from the University of Helsinki says.

Measurable health effects obtained by following communication principles

The 13 principles of communication that the researchers have crystallized are based on self-determination theory, which is a widely studied and applied theory of the human motivation and its social determinants. Hundreds of [empirical studies](#) from different areas of life, from [health care](#) to working life, have shown that supporting autonomy is essential to getting people to voluntarily commit to guidelines. The communication principles developed within the theory have been shown to provide tangible health-related outcomes in, for example, diabetes prevention, tobacco cessation and long term medication adherence.

The communication guidelines developed by the research team are structured around how they support the three human psychological needs for autonomy (a sense of volition and self-endorsement), competence (a sense of effectiveness and mastery), and relatedness (a sense of mutual care and interpersonal connection). In particular, the experts and decision-makers should make sure that their way of communication doesn't awaken defiance.

While many of the guidelines have not been directly tested in policy communication context, they provide the researchers' best efforts to propose strategies likely to have positive effects on people's voluntary

motivation based on currently available evidence in other domains.

More information: [researchportal.helsinki.fi/file/...
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