

New COVID-19 research: How to make people follow restrictions without appealing to fear

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Making people fear the coronavirus may motivate us to wash our hands, keep our distance and wear a face mask. But fear also takes a heavy toll

on our mental health and is fertile ground for discrimination and prejudice. New research shows a different path.

When the [coronavirus](#) pandemic hit the world in the spring of 2020, feelings of being capable or efficacious against the virus were a key factor in driving compliance with the authorities' guidelines. This is the result of a new study based on large surveys across eight Western democracies, published in *British Journal of Health Psychology*.

The extent to which we personally felt informed and capable of acting clearly affected the extent of our behavior to prevent infection, e.g. by keeping our distance and refraining from handshakes.

"These are important findings because they show a pathway to public compliance with pandemic health advice which is not driven by personal [fear](#). Today, in the spring of 2021, many countries are hit by a third wave of infections and authorities may be tempted to induce fear to make people follow guidelines. Our findings provide [policy makers](#) with an alternative," says Michael Bang Petersen, one of three authors behind the study, and a professor of political science at Aarhus University, Denmark.

Tell us what to do, and we will do it

In fact, the study shows that when people feel capable of handling the crisis, the impact of fear is no longer important. Those who feel efficacious comply with the authorities' guidelines regardless of whether they are worried about the health of themselves and their families. And they also comply regardless of whether they trust their government and their fellow citizens.

"Our study shows that in the [first stage](#) of the pandemic, a sense of urgency emerged and made people put aside individual considerations

and political differences. This sense caused people across the world to say: "Tell us what to do, and we will do it," says Professor Michael Bang Petersen.

26,000 participants from the UK, the USA and six EU countries

The study is based on representative surveys conducted in Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. A total of 26,508 people participated from March to May 2020 as the early events were unfolding.

"The study provides a unique insight into behavior during the first wave of an unprecedented crisis, which we can utilize both in the present and in the long term. Often, decision-makers are worried that the population will panic. But our data shows that authorities do not need to fear this. Instead, they should tell people as clearly as possible about the actual challenges and how people should act," Michael Bang Petersen concludes.

More information: Frederik Jørgensen et al, Compliance without fear: Individual-level protective behaviour during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, *British Journal of Health Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/bjhp.12519](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12519)

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