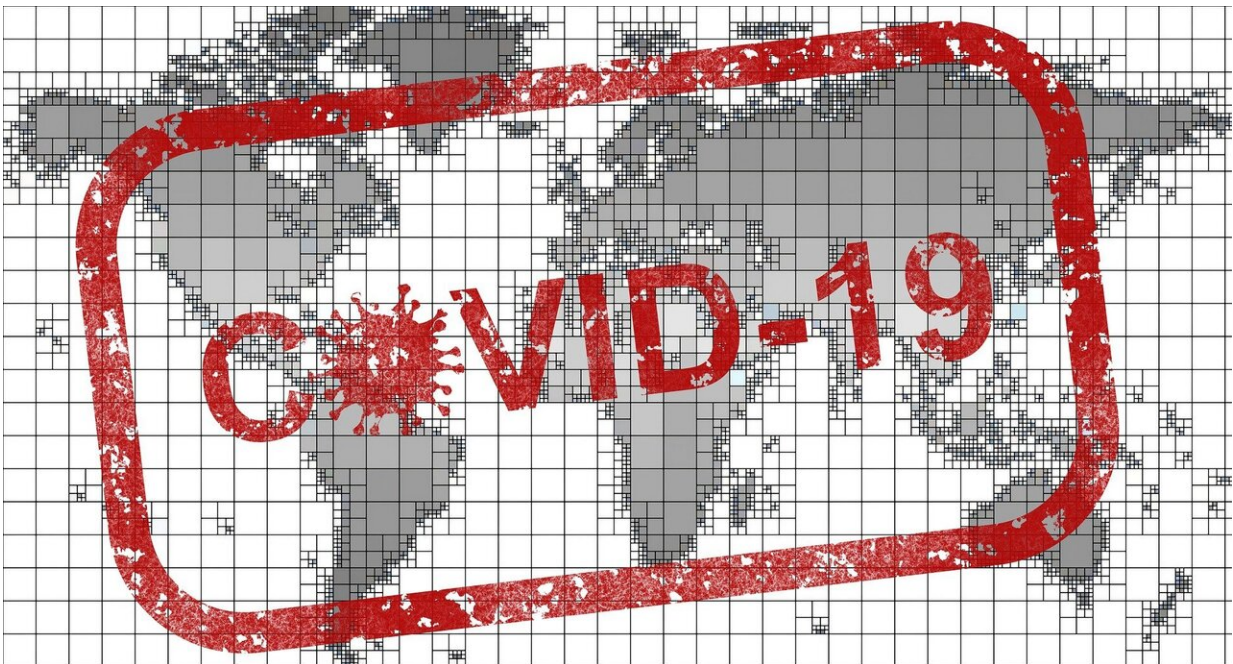


People becoming desensitized to COVID-19 illnesses, death, research suggests

July 20 2021, by Hannah Stevens and Karen Nikos-Rose



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Although people in early 2020 hoarded toilet paper, washed their hands incessantly, and wouldn't leave home, 11 months later the public pushed the envelope on COVID-19 safety precautions and ignored warnings as time went on, a new University of California, Davis, study suggests.

Researchers in the Department of Communication examined people's

reactions and expressions of anxiety about news articles on Twitter. Additionally, they investigated reactions to fear-inducing [health news](#) over [time](#), despite the steadily rising COVID-19 death toll, said Hannah Stevens, a doctoral student in communication and lead author of the paper.

The paper, "Desensitization to Fear-Inducing COVID-19 Health News on Twitter: Observational Study," was published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research Infodemiology* on July 16. The researchers examined how COVID-19 news articles shared to Twitter were first met with anxiety-ridden tweets early in the pandemic, during a coinciding spike in instances of panic-buying, extreme social distancing and quarantine measures. Despite the increased death toll, those behaviors then gave way over time to less concerned responses to COVID-19 news, along with increases in societal risk-taking during that [time period](#).

"COVID-19 has made an indelible mark on history, and now it's time to consider what went wrong so we can do better in communicating more effectively during future health crises, and even now, as the delta variant becomes more widespread," said Stevens. "First and foremost, we need to understand how and why scary health news lost impact over time, despite the rapidly increasing death toll."

The authors set out to test the hypothesis that early fear-based health messages in [news](#) reports significantly motivated individuals to take actions to control the threat, yet over-exposure to the same messages desensitized people—or made them less likely to feel anxious over time.

During a period of 11 months, the team used a computerized methodology to analyze linguistic anxiety levels in hundreds of COVID-19 [news articles](#) on Twitter, along with the anxiety levels in corresponding user tweets. They then correlated the findings with the COVID-19 [death toll](#) in the United States.

"Our study shows a need to delve deeper into how to re-sensitize the public and motivate them to take action in the face of an ongoing emergency. Testing the effectiveness of various health-risk communication strategies could quite possibly mean the difference between life and death in the future," Stevens said.

"If another health crisis occurred today, or COVID-19 takes another turn for the worse, it is essential for public [health](#) officials to consider that they are communicating to a desensitized public. I hope that this paper can be an impetus to get that discussion started."

More information: Stevens HR, Oh YJ, Taylor LR, Desensitization to Fear-Inducing COVID-19 Health News on Twitter: Observational Study, *JMIR Infodemiology* 2021;1(1):e26876, [DOI: 10.2196/26876](https://doi.org/10.2196/26876) , infodemiology.jmir.org/2021/1/e26876

Provided by UC Davis

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