

# Coping with COVID-19 stress easier with a dose of humor

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Funny memes may help people cope with the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, making viewers feel calmer and more content, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

Looking at memes about COVID-19 also increased people's confidence in their ability to deal with the pandemic, according to the study, published in the journal *Psychology of Popular Media*.

"As the pandemic kept dragging on, it became more and more interesting to me how people were using social media, and memes in particular, as a way to think about the pandemic," said lead author Jessica Gall Myrick, Ph.D., a professor at Pennsylvania State University. "We found that viewing just three memes can help people cope with the stress of living during a global pandemic."

Researchers surveyed 748 people online in December 2020 to determine whether viewing memes would influence their positive emotions, anxiety, information processing and coping surrounding COVID-19. They also sought to determine how memes with different content, subjects and levels of cuteness could affect the participants. Participants ranged from 18 to 88 years old, with an average age of 41.8, and were mostly white (72.2%), female (54.7%) and without a [college degree](#) (63.5%).

The researchers collected hundreds of popular memes from websites like "Imgur" and "IMGflip" and categorized them based on factors such as whether the image featured a human or an animal, if the human or animal was young or old (with young creatures typically judged as cuter) and whether the caption focused on COVID-19 or not. A group of participants reviewed and rated the humor and cuteness of each [meme](#), and the researchers only selected memes for the study that were viewed as equally funny and cute.

While most of the memes were left unaltered from their source, the researchers wrote some original captions to create similar COVID-related versus non-COVID-related captions for each meme. For example, one meme featured a picture of an angry cat with a COVID-

related caption that said, "New study confirms: Cats can't spread COVID-19 but would if given option." The non-COVID-related version of the meme showed the same cat image with the caption, "New study confirms: Cats can't sabotage your car but would if given option."

The researchers first measured how often in the past month participants felt nervous or stressed, among other items. The participants were then randomly assigned to view three memes with the same kind of subject (animal or human), cuteness level (adult or baby) and caption (COVID-related or non-COVID-related) or one of three control conditions featuring plain text without any images. After viewing the media, participants rated how cute and funny they found the meme or control text and reported their levels of anxiety and positive emotions such as calmness, relaxation and cheer. They also rated how much the media caused them to think about other information they knew about COVID-19, their confidence in their ability to cope with the pandemic and their stress about the disease.

The researchers found that people who viewed memes compared with other types of media reported higher levels of humor and more positive emotions, which was indirectly related to a decrease in stress about the COVID-19 pandemic. People who viewed memes with captions related to COVID-19 were even more likely to have lower stress levels about the pandemic than people who viewed memes without COVID-related captions.

"While the World Health Organization recommended that people avoid too much COVID-related media for the benefit of their mental health, our research reveals that memes about COVID-19 could help people feel more confident in their ability to deal with the pandemic," Myrick said. "This suggests that not all media are uniformly bad for mental health and people should stop and take stock of what type of media they are consuming. If we are all more conscious of how our behaviors, including

time spent scrolling, affect our emotional states, then we will better be able to use social [media](#) to help us when we need it and to take a break from it when we need that instead."

The researchers also found that people who viewed COVID-related memes thought more deeply about the content they viewed and felt more confident in their ability to cope with the pandemic than people who viewed non-COVID-related captions or any of the control conditions. However, people who viewed cute memes featuring human or animal babies were less likely to think about the [pandemic](#) and process how it affected their lives, even when the memes' captions were about COVID-19.

These findings suggest that [social media](#) content about stressful public events can help people process the news without getting overwhelmed by it, according to Myrick.

"Public health advocates or government agencies could potentially benefit by using memes as a cheap, easily accessible way to communicate about stressful events with the public, though they should avoid overly cute memes," Myrick said. "The [positive emotions](#) associated with this type of content may make people feel psychologically safer and therefore better able to pay attention to the underlying messages related to health threats."

**More information:** ["Consuming memes during the COVID pandemic: Effects of memes and meme type on COVID-related stress and coping efficacy."](#) by Jessica Gall Myrick, Ph.D., and Nicholas Eng, MS, Pennsylvania State University, and Robin Nabi, Ph.D., University of California Santa Barbara. *Psychology of Popular Media*, published online October 18, 2021.

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