

Why communicating about COVID is so important, and how experts can do a better job

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Remember the early days of the pandemic? As people flocked to stores—often to find empty shelves—scientists and politicians shared

what they knew about the virus. Since then, our understanding of COVID-19 has improved dramatically. So, too, has the way we talk about it.

Indeed, the pandemic has proven the importance of effective [public health](#) communication. Two USC Price professors spoke about what we have learned about getting people to change their behavior for the common good—sometimes referred to as "nudging"—and what they view as opportunities for improvement as we enter the next phase of the pandemic.

The importance of taking a cautious approach

As the [scientific community](#) has worked to learn more about the coronavirus, its messaging to the public changed. For example, it is now widely known that the virus principally infects people through respiratory droplets, not contaminated surfaces. But as our understanding of the virus improved, some used the change to cast doubt on the qualifications of the experts who were providing updates.

For this reason, Dr. Jason Doctor, USC Price professor and chair of its Department of Health Policy and Management, says public health professionals must be cautious when discussing early findings.

"You set up credibility traps for yourself if you're not careful, so you need to hedge more and make your recommendations more conditional on the current circumstances," Doctor said.

He pointed to another instance of this, when President Joe Biden's administration signaled vaccinated people could remove their masks for good early in the summer of 2021.

"It would have been fine to say, "Everyone needs a break. Cases are low,

and this is probably a good time to take off our masks for a while." But instead, it was a strong message about, "This is going to work, we're all vaccinated and everything is good," and it didn't work out that way," Doctor said.

He subscribes to Dr. Ashish Jha's philosophy that preventative methods such as masking should be viewed like raincoats: we use them when we need to, and put them away when they are not.

"We're more aware of our limits, but I think we've pivoted more to understand what makes people cooperate," Doctor said.

Three keys to encouraging behavior changes

Doctor's thinking aligns with that of Dr. Wändi Bruine de Bruin, provost professor of public policy, psychology, and [behavioral science](#) at USC Price and USC Dornsife. The two professors co-direct the Behavioral Sciences research program at the USC Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics.

Bruine de Bruin says for experts to communicate well, their recommendations need to be clear, compelling and easy to follow.

She has been sometimes frustrated with the conflicting public health messaging about the pandemic over the past two years.

"There was a lot of confusion that could have been prevented if they had thought a little bit harder about how to communicate," she said. For instance, she says while experts in public health understood the term "social distancing," most people were unfamiliar with the phrase before March 2020. She says a similar lack of clarity surrounded masks until recently.

"When mask use became a recommendation, it was already known that N95 masks were the best to use, so they could have communicated that better," said Bruine de Bruin.

To make a behavior attractive, Bruine de Bruin says, one must see others doing it. That is why she was dismayed with how much media coverage vaccine-resistant people received.

"They were not the majority, but they were getting a lot of attention," she said.

Finally, Bruine de Bruin says participating in healthy behaviors—including getting vaccinated—must be easy for everyone to do. She says this became alarmingly clear last spring, when people with flexible jobs and cars tended to get the first vaccine appointments.

"Vulnerable people were not being reached," she said. "In the end, who got vaccinated first? The affluent white people."

Lessons learned for the next crisis

Bruine de Bruin hopes leaders use lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to plan ahead for the next crisis. That includes using effective communication reach the people who will be affected.

"It's not just about getting the science of the vaccine right. Please also get the social science of your messaging right," she said. "One way to address these things in a way that actually works is to involve members of your intended audience in your message development."

Doctor says a positive aspect of the pandemic is the wider implementation of large studies involving multiple agencies, corporations and universities.

"That wasn't really new since the pandemic, but it became more important because we really needed information quickly," he said.

In one form or another, the [pandemic](#) is here to stay, and we will continue to rely on the public health community for guidance. If they employ effective communication methods, the public will be more likely to make choices that reduce the spread of the virus, resulting in fewer deaths, hospitalizations and—ultimately—restrictions.

Provided by University of Southern California

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