

New study finds public health messaging could benefit from an 'autonomy-supportive' approach

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Novel research led by psychologists from Durham University, UK and Illinois Institute of Technology, U.S., along with the collaborative

network of researchers around the world (under the consortium name "Psychological Science Accelerator Self-Determination Theory Collaboration") have discovered that public health communication is highly effective when an "autonomy-supportive" approach is undertaken compared to controlling message approach.

The researchers tested the motivational qualities on [communication](#) about social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic among over 25,000 participants from 89 countries.

They revealed that controlling message carried the most negative effects on attitudes to social distancing where people felt pressured to follow the messaging.

The study findings indicate that controlling message increased controlled motivation such as motivation relying on shame, guilt, and fear of social consequences whereas the autonomy-supportive message lowered feelings of defiance compared to the controlling message.

The researchers found evidence of positive correlation between motivation of shame and fear with feelings of defiance, which is important in the way that affect people's engagement with public [health](#) messages.

The researchers also point out that encouraging messaging has the potential to influence a positive motivation which is linked to a stronger intention to engage with [public health messages](#) both in the short and long term.

Full result of the research has been published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Co-lead author of the study, Dr. Thuy-vy Nguyen of Durham University,

said: "This is an impressive team effort of researchers around the world. It allows us to respond timely to this [global crisis](#). Our data is made open so other researchers can reuse the [data](#) to understand what other factors may contribute to the effectiveness of different types of messages, which is likely to vary depending on countries."

The researchers stress the importance of understanding and paying attention to motivations that enable people to adapt positive behavioral change and engage effectively with important health messages, which can only be achieved with positive and supportive communication.

Public health communications play a critical role in managing health emergencies, including during pandemics, to motivate people to engage in behaviors like [hand washing](#), mask wearing, vaccine uptake, and [social distancing](#).

The study highlights the potential harm of using shaming and pressuring language in public health communication that can have serious implications for the current and future global health challenges.

The researchers hope that the large dataset used in this study can help advance future research and applications of evidence-based health communication on a global scale for the current COVID-19 pandemic and for future public health crises.

More information: A global experiment on motivating social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2111091119](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2111091119)

Provided by Durham University

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