

# In crises like COVID-19, thinking about what really matters can make people more likely to save lives

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When a person is facing a life-or-death decision, considering how certain aspects of the situation should affect their choice can make them more likely to save lives—according to new research published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

The researchers, Tom Gordon-Hecker and Tehila Kogut of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, clarified that thinking about the situation more generally is unlikely to have the same result, because people may be distracted from what matters most to them.

"In a humanitarian crisis, most people believe that saving lives is the most important consideration but may overlook this in their [decision-making](#)," says lead author Tom Gordon-Hecker. "Asking people to reflect on their values and beliefs, and to rate the extent to which these aspects of the situation should affect their decisions, helps them focus on what really matters."

Researchers examined preferences for policies aimed at limiting the spread of COVID-19, such as lockdowns with major economic consequences. In the first study, 251 Israeli students were split into three groups and asked to consider the possibility of a strict lockdown that would save 5,000 lives while costing the nation's economy \$40 billion.

One group was asked to decide immediately whether they would impose the lockdown, while a second was instructed to think carefully about the decision. The third group participated in a process known as structural analysis of personal criteria before making their decision. They were asked to rate how [important factors](#) like saving lives, preventing [economic damage](#), and protecting the well-being of the greater population should influence their choice. Additionally, each participant across the three groups shared what they thought was the minimum number of lives that would have to be saved in order to justify a month-long lockdown. Finally, all participants rated how important each of the factors were in their decision-making.

Participants who were asked specifically to consider these factors before making their decision reported that they gave more weight to the aspect of saving lives in their [decision process](#) compared to those in the other

two groups. Participants who did not consider these factors in advance were willing to accept more than three times as many deaths before agreeing to impose a lockdown.

The researchers' second study focused on damage related to Hurricane Dorian, which struck the Bahamas in 2019. Three-hundred fifty-seven Americans were asked to decide whether to donate money to support rescue attempts of three Americans or five Argentinians. As with the previous experiment, participants were divided into three groups—one was asked to make an immediate decision, another was told to think carefully first, while a third was asked to rate how important the number of lives saved and the nationality of the victims should be in their decisions.

After making their decisions, all participants in the study rated the importance of the number of lives saved compared to victim nationality. The group that rated the importance of the different attributes of the decision in advance was more likely to report giving more weight to the number of lives saved in the decision, and accordingly, was more likely to prefer donating to the rescue attempts of the five Argentinians over the three Americans.

"People often make decisions that affect the lives of others," says Dr. Gordon-Hecker. "While such decisions often involve strong emotional responses, their complexity might make the reliance on such emotions unhelpful. We propose a way to shift people's focus back onto the important aspects of the situation, paving the way for better decisions."

Dr. Gordon-Hecker suggests that future research could investigate the effects of this type of self-analysis on people after they have made a decision.

"If this analysis of personal criteria helps people make decisions that

better align with their values and beliefs," says Dr. Gordon-Hecker, "would it also make them more satisfied and less regretful?"

**More information:** Structured Analysis of Personal Criteria can Save Lives, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/19485506221141987](https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506221141987)

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