

With public health messaging, saying 'why' matters

December 14 2022, by Keri Brown



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From education campaigns about youth vaping prevention to emergency notifications during various outbreaks, persuasive communication approaches are important in public health.

A new study co-authored by Lucy D'Agostino McGowan, assistant professor of statistics at Wake Forest University, takes a closer look at how transparency in messaging can influence community response. Hannah Mendoza worked with D'Agostino McGowan as part of her honors thesis when she was an undergraduate student.

The study by D'Agostino McGowan and Mendoza was published today in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

How it all began

Their research was sparked by early recommendations from officials surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought into question how decisions and guidelines regarding science and public health are communicated to the public. One of those was masking.

"The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other institutions initially recommended not wearing masks; perhaps if there had been more nuance included in initial [communication](#), then there could have been better compliance with later recommendations, when they ultimately did recommend masking," said D'Agostino McGowan.

"For example, they could have stated the reason, such as 'we recommend not wearing masks currently because we don't yet have evidence that would help with this pathogen.' Or, 'our best studies on masking are based on the flu.' If there had just been more context, then maybe the uptake would have been different when the recommendation changed."

Conducting a randomized trial

To test this out, D'Agostino McGowan and Mendoza created a hypothetical scenario that wasn't directly tied to the pandemic. Questions

were presented to participants that centered around a baseline inquiry:
Do you disinfect your cell phone?

Nearly 600 individuals from across the country were part of the randomized study. These participants were then split into two groups with one half receiving a health recommendation alone and the other half receiving a recommendation with more transparent information about why the decision was being made.

"What we found is that for people who would have been hesitant to follow the final health recommendation, if you give them the actual [reasoning](#) behind it from the beginning, they are more likely to follow the final recommendation compared to those who were not shown the transparent information in the initial one."

Why the research is meaningful

It's important to note that communications in public [health](#) can change rapidly, and recommendations are often based on available data for the targeted population. But even if complete information isn't readily available, D'Agostino McGowan said clear, concise, and straightforward messaging that includes a "why" is key for increasing public response and building trust in communities.

The study is significant because it has implications that extend beyond the [public health](#) arena.

Further studies are needed, she added. "This type of research can help us better understand how these communications influence a person's behavior in various scenarios."

More information: Hannah Mendoza et al, Randomized controlled trial: Quantifying the impact of disclosing uncertainty on adherence to

hypothetical health recommendations, *PLOS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0278263](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0278263)

Provided by Wake Forest University

Citation: With public health messaging, saying 'why' matters (2022, December 14) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-12-health-messaging.html>

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