

# Every Australian needs to keep a lid on social distancing backlash

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While each Australian is dealing with pandemic mental health stressors in their own way, COVID denial is an ineffective approach to dealing with anxiety that could prove dangerous to the country if it emerges as a social distancing backlash, according to psychology expert Professor Colin MacLeod.

Professor MacLeod, from UWA's School of Psychological Science, says a whole-community approach, as has already been effective in containing the virus itself, is needed to keep watch for any backlash and keep a lid on it.

"We have seen in the US a movement protesting against [social distancing](#) and social isolation and that is definitely something we would not want to see take off in Australia," Professor MacLeod said.

"What we can do as a community, in order to reduce this, is ensure there is a collective response at the very earliest stage—a shared criticism of our community colleagues who engage in this.

"We need to come together as we have to reduce

the COVID spread itself. Taking steps early, as a broader community, to ensure that this type of activity is seen as being un-Australian and not conducive to a shared welfare.

"And I would hope that this community and [peer pressure](#) in Australia can reduce the risk of experiencing the US's problem with protests—a problem that I think is likely to grow there."

Professor MacLeod, who has received international recognition from his work illuminating the types of cognitive biases that underlie emotional vulnerability and resilience, said there could be multiple reasons why people did not follow social distancing guidelines, but a significant factor was that denial was a means of managing anxiety.

"One only feels anxiety when the future feels threatening and if a person chooses to believe that COVID is no different to the flu, then this reduces the perceived threat and so reduces anxiety," he said.

"But this has potentially detrimental consequences. A means of reducing anxiety by denying the threat gives you short-term relief but it removes the beneficial impact of that [anxiety](#) because it removes the drive to engage in the behaviours that will reduce the actual threat."

He said the current US backlash and mass protests against social distancing and [social isolation](#) had been "predictable" and so had not come as a surprise.

"The US is a society where culturally individualism has always been the priority, and community welfare is not something that has been collectively embraced as much as individualism," Professor MacLeod said.

"In Australia, there are two distinct differences. We are not as collective a culture as some of the Asian

cultures, but I think we have a much more balanced culture than the US. During the pandemic, we have seen a community responsiveness in Australia of foregoing personal interests in preference to interests of the community. We have done that well and I think it is more consistent with the Australian way.

"The other thing is, unlike the US, I don't think our COVID crisis has yet been politicised. These considerations make me less concerned that we will see a backlash problem in Australia, however, what we can do as a community, in order to reduce the risk, is ensure a collective response at the very earliest stage."

With WA leading Australia along the path to recovery, the McGowan Government has released a roadmap to carefully ease COVID-19 restrictions, to start getting Western Australians back to work safely and begin the process of restarting the State's economy.

However, Premier Mark McGowan warns implementing these phases relies on each and every Western Australian to continue to practice good social distancing and good personal hygiene.

Provided by University of Western Australia

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