

# Goal importance and others' behavior—not fear—lead to COVID-19 safety compliance

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Fear that you are at particularly lethal risk of COVID-19 infection might not be quite as strong of motivation to support strict government regulations and drastically change your lifestyle as your perception of whether others are doing enough to fight COVID-19, concludes a new study looking into data from the United Kingdom and Switzerland. The research paper is published in the peer-reviewed scientific journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*.

While earlier research has mostly looked into factors such as fear, perceived risk, age and [political views](#) to determine what makes individuals and societies more or less willing to drastically change their lifestyle and support government-imposed strict restrictions, in order to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, psychologists at the University of Zurich Charlotte Kukowski, Katharina Bernecker and Veronika Brandstätter took a different perspective.

Instead, they chose to find out the impact of people's perception of others' behavior when it comes to the public good, as well as people's own

self-control in sticking to behavior guidelines. By using data from the United Kingdom and Switzerland, they concluded that, indeed, valuing fair contribution to the public good and the ability to practice self-control make people more likely to undertake health-protective behavior, though the effects for self-control are not entirely consistent across the countries the authors sampled. Further, people who are more concerned with the cooperation of their fellow citizens and expect them to do their own part are more supportive of government regulations, possibly as a means of ensuring that others comply. However, the authors stress that future studies need to test this possible link. The study is published in the peer-reviewed, open-access scientific journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*.

Successfully overcoming conflicting desires and needs, such as taking public transportation, meeting with friends, and participating in large gatherings, for the benefit of society means that people must practice self-control. People will only be willing to control their desires and needs, however, if they value the higher [goal](#), that is, managing the pandemic, even though their own health-protective behavior might not affect them directly. In this sense, self-control in the service of a societal goal is quite different from self-control for a personal goal, such as sticking to a healthy diet or meeting career goals.: While exercising and career achievements are largely private concerns, we all depend on each other's cooperation when it comes to a societal goal like managing COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher goal importance and perception of others' behavior are key factors in practicing health-protective behavior.

"(...) we would like to emphasize that the effects of self-control and cooperation emerged above and beyond the effects of variables such as personal cost of engaging in health-protective behaviors, perceived risk and anxiety, and political orientation.

If future work replicates these findings, one might cautiously conclude that, in a time of crisis, people—including decision-makers—are indeed able to "rise above themselves" and lay aside political differences and personal costs for collective goal attainment," say the researchers.

The authors note that in collective actions, it is essential that one sees others put in the same effort.

In conclusion, the scientists note that, in order to improve public efforts in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other collective goals, including [climate change mitigation](#), it is essential that we identify the factors contributing to successful [self-control](#) and cooperation in the service of higher, society-level goals.

**More information:** Charlotte Kukowski et al, Self-control and beliefs surrounding others' cooperation predict own health-protective behaviors and support for COVID-19 government regulations: Evidence from two European countries, *Social Psychological Bulletin* (2021). DOI: [10.32872/spb.4391](https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.4391)

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