

Implementation and communications: harnessing behavioural science to maintain social distancing

- **‘Protect yourself’** messages will have limited impact because many consider themselves low risk. Messages based solely on information, authority or fear/disgust will also likely be ineffective.
- **‘Protect each other’** messages are more promising, particularly when building on **‘stand together’** and **‘this is who we are’** messages. These are rooted in the psychology of social identity,(1) social influence(2) and moral behaviour,(3) with evidence of benefits in the COVID-19 and other health contexts.(4, 5)
- **‘Make a plan and review it regularly’** messages can further build on the above, rooted in the psychology of reflective decisions to break emotion- or habit-driven behaviour and help people anticipate possible barriers and enablers to adherence and address them in advance .(6, 7)
- Adherence is more likely to be improved by messaging about/actual support to **‘make it possible’** embodying progressive universal principles(8) than by punishment or castigation.
- **Communications planning** need to be informed by behavioural science, prior engagement and research, and be pre-tested and evaluated.

‘Stand together’ messages should build on how our sense of self is rooted in our proud membership of families, neighbourhoods, communities and nation, linked to sense of duty, solidarity and inclusion. Messages should come from voices representative of and trusted by the group rather than those perceived as partisan or self-interested.(9) Messages may be tailored to appeal to specific sub-groups based on gender, age or regional, ethnic or cultural affiliations,(10) drawing on family and faith/interfaith voices particularly for some class and ethnic groups.(11) In doing so, it is critical to draw on voices which are appropriate to the group in question. For instance, young people are particularly influenced by the voices of peers and others of their age group including celebrities/influencers, which need to be harnessed to improve adherence among those aged 16-24.(12) It is also critical to avoid stereotypic or divisive messages. Rather, using inspiring concrete examples (such as NHS volunteers) it must be stressed that different ethnic, socio-economic etc. groups are working together, helping each other and are all integral parts of a common broader community. Messaging will be undermined where policies are perceived as unequitable or socially divisive.

‘This is who we are’ messages must draw upon the norms of the group invoked to influence behaviour.(13) Messages must be presented as reflecting and affirming group culture (injunctive norms: ‘this is who we really are’), and group behaviour (descriptive norms: ‘this is what we are doing’).(14) Messages which imply people are doing undesirable things (‘don’t panic’; don’t cheat) may backfire.

‘Protect each other’ messages should stress how desired behaviours benefit the group and protect its most vulnerable members including those we love. This is enhanced by concrete examples, powerful images and the actual voices of those we need to protect (loved ones, the vulnerable, the NHS) linked to clear, specific advice on how to implement social distancing. Images and accounts of widespread population adherence (not images of panic or cheating) can persuade those whose willingness to help others is conditional on others doing so to over-ride individual self-interest and to act in the collective interest.(15, 16)

‘Make a plan and review it regularly’ messages should give clear, specific and calm advice, helping households to plan together how to commit to social distancing while still accessing income, food, social networks/communication and exercise. Circumstances will evolve so householders should be

encouraged to review plans regularly. Planning materials should be provided in paper copy or via web/app support.

‘Make it possible:’ Reward, incentives and enablement tend to be more effective influences on behaviour than punishment, disincentives or castigation.(17, 18) Behaviour is influenced by social context as much as individual psychology.(19) Messaging will be more persuasive and more effective if there is a clearly communicated offer of timely and generous support in terms of income, employment rights, food, social networks/communication (e.g. lower prices for phone calls/data), entertainment (e.g. improved BBC iPlayer offer, deals to provide free computer games), education (e.g. national online not piecemeal provision), and parenting and mental health (e.g. effective online tools made freely available). Such support needs to embrace progressive universalism – open to all but aiming to maximise benefits for the most disadvantaged.(8) Lower rates of adherence for example among the self-employed and lone parents of young children are likely to reflect continuing economic and social barriers. There are also reports of sub-optimal social distancing arrangements within workplaces, which need to be a focus for health and safety policy and inspections. Reducing barriers to social distancing will increase adherence and reduce the distrust, distress and mental ill health arising from these barriers.

Communications planning: Messages should be communicated via slick mass and social media campaigns (not just expert or political talking heads) and via working with media outlets to promote responsible coverage (visibility to collective adherence not social divisions or cheating). In order to ensure that the evidence-based general principles of messaging are accurately translated into specific messages, departmental communications teams should discuss campaign briefs with behavioural scientists within departments and with SPI-B.

Each campaign should be considered an intervention with campaign briefs including the following: a defined behavioural aim (e.g. under ‘consumer objectives’), message (e.g. under ‘focal insight’), source/voice and medium/method (e.g. under ‘deliverables’), target group (e.g. under ‘target audience’) and expected reach and indicators (e.g. in ‘objectives/outcomes’). Each brief should include in its ‘design principles’ a theory of change of how campaign activities aim to generate behavioural impacts. Campaigns should include in ‘support/evidence’ what evidence and principles of behaviour change are being used. Individual interventions should form part of a coherent overall programme with consistency of information. Campaigns should also consider the potential for unintended consequences using existing frameworks to minimise these possibilities.(20)

Interventions should be co-designed and piloted with relevant audience groups using online engagement and focus groups.(15, 21) They should be evaluated using a priori indicators and the evaluation should feed back into future communications. Polling and quantitative and qualitative research data should be used to assess the impact of the overall communications programme on trends in a) sense of collective identity, b) sense of duty of care to others, c) motivation for social distancing, d) behaviour planning and e) behaviour.

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