

Suggestions for messaging about preventive behaviours in the next phases of the UK's response to the Covid-19 pandemic

SPI-B 03.06.20

Key messages

- For each phase of the UK's Covid-19 response, messaging needs to tell people precisely what to do (i.e. the intended behavioural outcome), when to do it and why they should do it.
- Slogans cannot provide as much information on the specifics of 'when', 'what' and 'why' as can more detailed messaging; if slogans cannot be worded in a way that indicates what behaviour to enact (e.g. 'stay at home') then they should be avoided and more nuanced information communicated in other ways.
- We suggest what effective slogans and messaging could look like for the next phase.

Remit of this paper

We review previous slogans and messaging to suggest ways to develop this in future phases, reiterating key points previously raised in SPI-B papers, all of which are available now as journal articles¹⁻³ or in other formats.⁴

We do not address the timing of such changes (since this is the remit of SPI-M and SAGE), how the strategy for each change of phase is developed (since this is covered in another new SPI-B paper), or how behaviour change should be enabled by policies relating to safe workplaces, access to outdoor space etc. (since this is covered in previous SPI-B papers).

As we move between phases with different restrictions and measures, messaging should balance information about what restrictions are being amended with information about the behaviours required to minimise risks of increased transmission.

We suggest more behaviourally specific alternatives to the current slogans and some of the other messages as examples. These suggestions have been informed by previous work that changed the way in which recommendations were worded by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.^{1,5}

Table 1: Communication dos and don'ts with specific examples for June messaging

Do	Don't	Example of how to implement for 1 June changes
<p><i>Be specific, precise and consistent:</i> Give precise advice about what behaviour/behaviour change is needed.</p> <p>Present concrete examples of what following and not following the advice would look like, powerful multi-cultural images and the actual voices of those we</p>	<p>Don't give vague advice or suggestions, or mixed or inconsistent messages.</p>	<p>Message: "Don't go shopping if you can buy it online."</p> <p>Message: "Keep 2m apart from other parents and children if you take your children to school."</p>

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<p>need to protect (loved ones, the vulnerable, the NHS).</p>		<p>Do not face each other when speaking</p>
<p>Tailor, motivate and enable: Think about what information people need, how to motivate them and how to ensure they have what they need in order to change their behaviour.</p> <p>Tailor messages and images to appeal to specific audiences e.g. gender, age, region, ethnicity or culture.</p> <p>Stress how desired behaviours protect the most vulnerable including those we love.</p> <p>Communicate how our sense of self is rooted in membership of families, neighbourhoods, communities and nation.</p> <p>Use concrete examples (such as NHS volunteers) to stress how different ethnic, socio-economic etc. groups are helping each other.</p> <p>Tell people what support is available to help them adhere.</p> <p>Help households plan how to socially distance and review these plans regularly.</p>	<p>Don't use stereotypic or divisive messages, or messages that lack content about what people should do and why.</p>	<p>Slogan: "Walk to school, Save lives".</p> <p>Signage: "Shop 2m apart. Save lives."</p> <p>Slogan: "Yorkshire, Standing Together, Keeping 2m Apart."</p> <p>Signage: "Protecting our families and neighbours, Washing our hands"</p>
<p>Promote trust and show respect: Draw on voices trusted by the group, for example...</p> <p>Emphasise what people are doing well rather than focus on a minority of people not adhering.</p>	<p>Don't show or imply that people are doing undesirable things.</p>	<p>Messages from a diverse array of 'national treasures' (e.g. Julie Walters, Nadiya Hussain, David Attenborough, Idris Elba) and those who are visibly NHS/other key workers.</p> <p>Congratulate people because 95% are doing x behaviour</p>

Table 2: Examples of communication dos and don'ts applied to previous messaging

Current message/slogan		Behaviourally specific message/slogan	
Slogan/message	Evaluation	Slogan/message	Advantage
Message from Government guidance 12/5/20: "Keep your hands and face as clean as possible"	This does not meet the principle that the behavioural outcome is relevant to transmission. ¹	"Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth."	This message has a precise and relevant behavioural outcome.
Message from Government guidance 11/5/20: "Public Health England recommends trying to keep two metres away from people as a precaution. However, this is not a rule and the science is complex."	This does not meet the principle of a clear behavioural outcome. ^{1,2} The caveat could be perceived as providing a justification for ignoring the advice. ^{1,3,5}	"If you need to come closer than 2m at work, make it brief (less than 15 minutes) and don't face each other."	This messages provides a pertinent and actionable behavioural outcomes.
Slogan from 11/5/20: "Stay alert; Control the virus; Save lives."	This does not meet the principle of a specific behavioural outcome. ^{1,2} It is not clear what to be alert about, what to do if alertness identifies a threat, or how to control the virus. ^{1,3}	"Keep our distance; Wash our hands; Play our part."	This reminds people what to focus on and in construction mirrors the earlier three part, short 'stay at home' slogan. It also focuses on the importance of collective action.
Message from 18/5/20 daily briefing: "Limit contact with others" and "Keep your distance if you go out (2m where possible)."	This does not meet the principle of a specific behavioural outcome. ^{1,2} 'Limit' and 'contact' are subjective terms so provide insufficient cues for behaviour change. ¹ The qualifying "where possible" reduces the impact of the message. ^{1,3}	"Only meet up socially with one person outside your household at a time. Meet outside and remain 2m apart."	This provides an objectively worded behavioural outcome.

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<p>Additional slogan from 19/5/20: "Keep our distance; Wash our hands; Think of others; Play our part, all together"</p>	<p>This contains some redundancy.</p>	<p>"Keep our distance; Wash our hands; Play our part."</p>	<p>This reminds people what behaviour to focus on. It also focuses on collective identity and care for others to motivate behaviour where self-protection will often be insufficient.²</p>
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References

1. Michie S, West R, Rogers B, et al. Reducing SARS-CoV-2 transmission in the UK: a behavioural science approach to identifying options for increasing adherence to social distancing and shielding vulnerable people. *British Journal of Health Psychology* <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12428> 2020
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4. SPI-B. Principles and checklist for developing and implementing updated COVID-19 guidance. Report available from the SAGE secretariat.
5. Michie S, Johnston M. Changing clinical behaviour by making guidelines specific. *British Medical Journal* 2004;328:343–5.