

SPI-B: What are the behavioural considerations around communicating changes to the 2m social distancing guidance? [16 June 2020]

SPI-B have been asked to provide an extremely rapid opinion on issues surrounding the communication of changes to the 2m rule. A variety of factors will inform the decision to revise the 2m social distancing guidelines including epidemiological and economic factors, which SPI-B is not in a position to comment on. This document summarises several of the most salient behavioural considerations that should be factored into any decision to alter the current guidance.

The public now have a reasonable understanding of the 2m rule. Awareness and understanding of a new rule or set of rules will need to be built up again over time.

The new rule(s) are also likely to involve the communication of a more complex set of behaviours, for example, where they stipulate exceptions to the allowable social distance in different settings or in the presence of other protective measures (e.g. face coverings).

Complex behaviours can be successfully embedded if they are communicated in a clear and consistent manner. If people have a good 'mental model' (aka understanding) of the principles of transmission, it should be possible to communicate a degree of nuance around a 2m rule (e.g. "2m, except when face coverings are worn, or people are side by side etc"). SPI-B has provided detailed guidance on the [principles for developing and implementing updated Covid-19 guidance](#). Nevertheless, in addition to the increased risks of infection spread which would result from reducing the current 2m guidance, the behavioural science points to a number of additional risks.

Accordingly, from a behavioural science perspective, SPI-B would not currently recommend any change to the existing 2m guidance for the following reasons:

I. In the context of other changes, a reduction to 1m may undermine adherence in general

The impact of any change to the 2m social distancing guidance needs to be understood in the context of the relaxation of other measures and restrictions, and also in conjunction with diminishing levels of adherence over time [a, b].

The relaxation of any individual measure has a signalling value. That is to say, the easing of a measure sends a message to the public which affects the perceived threat from the virus. Each relaxation therefore has the potential to be perceived as signifying a reduction in risk. This can have a knock-on effect on adherence to any given measure. Furthermore, when more than one measure is relaxed at the same time, or in close conjunction with another this could have an impact on adherence to measures in an additive or even multiplicative manner. Making any change to the 2m guidance at the same time or in close proximity to wider easements may therefore be detrimental to overall levels of adherence.

II. A 1m social distance may entirely undermine social distancing

The study of proxemics (the human use of space) shows that a 1m separation is close to the default social distance in normal day-to-day interactions in many settings. A move to a 1m distance (as a rule or in conjunction with other measures) may eliminate the perception that there is any rule for social distancing.

III. People are likely to go closer than 1m with people they are close to psychologically

Spatial behaviour is heavily impacted by social relations. People tend to place themselves closer to friends, acquaintances, and members of their own group [c]. These are the people one is likely to be interacting with in public spaces (friends in a bar, workmates in an office etc.) In addition, estimates of distance are themselves influenced by social relational factors. While shared goals lead to perceptions of shorter physical distance [d], non-threatening stimuli are perceived as further away – and so can lead people to move (too) close to them [e]. Therefore, a 1m rule easily becomes 80cm or less, thus further increasing the risks of transmission.

IV. At 1m people are likely to move and come into direct physical contact.

Human beings are not static objects, so even if people seek scrupulously to place themselves at 1m, they will vary around this point. Moreover, this variation is non-systematic. We lean in towards those we feel psychologically close to and when we engage with them. Once again 1m becomes less than a metre. At these distances, there is a higher probability of unthinking or inadvertent touching – thus creating a direct means of infection transmission. What is more, all these issues will be exacerbated by the disinhibitions caused by alcohol in certain spaces.

V. 1m rule may have a disproportionate effect on vulnerable groups

The move from a 2m to a 1m rule or similar with mitigations such as facemasks, ventilation and deep cleaning, might create particular communication issues for BAME and socio-economically deprived communities. These groups have already been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic because they often had to continue working as keyworkers (in healthcare, care and logistics) during the lockdown [f]. It is likely that the change to a 1m rule in workplaces will be received as a further undermining of workplace safety, that exposes people and their families and communities to greater danger [g]. This could produce anxiety, non-attendance and potentially distrust and protest among these groups [h, i]. The government may be seen to be increasing further the risks they already face in their workplaces [j].

In addition, temporary contractual workers in hospitality, care, industry, services, education and agriculture may be afraid to attend work in the new 1m distanced workplaces. This anxiety will be greater because contractual workers do not have sufficient influence to enforce the safe use of the new rules and their related mitigations [k]. This could produce greater distrust of all government policy actions to ameliorate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

These negative effects could only be reduced if there were to be government legal enforcement of rigorous health and safety risk assessments in workplaces alongside the new social distancing policy changes. These should take into account the particular status of specific employees, including for example EDI considerations and tailoring the assessments for individual workers [l]. They should also be as rigorous for contractual employees as for permanent employees. However even with these legal provisions and individual assessments extended to contractual workers, it is likely that socio-economically deprived and BAME groups will respond negatively to communications around a loosening of social distancing rules. These may be taken as evidence that the government is not to be trusted as it is not keeping them safe at work.

VI. Schools may represent a special case. Further consideration is needed.

Schools may represent a special case in the context of the 2m rule, due to the specific risks of transmission among children. SPI-B has not considered this in detail (and are not constituted to consider the epidemiology within school settings). However, we note that a specific consideration of this may be worthwhile.

References

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