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GUIDANCE

Behavioural science and disease prevention: Psychological guidance

Psychology is crucial to reducing the spread of Covid-19 as it enables us to understand and change behaviour and anticipate people's responses to changes in policy and guidelines. Behaviours are key to preventing infection and improving outcomes.

To optimise policies and communication, psychologists recommend:

- 1 Minimise the 'I' and emphasise the 'we'.** Create a collective viewpoint. Use messaging that highlights how we can look after each other, rather than how you can look after yourself.
- 2 Deliver messages from a credible source in relatable terms to the target audience.** The public need to trust policies, strategies, information and guidance. The messenger needs to be deemed credible and the message needs to be relevant and achievable.
- 3 Create worry but not fear.** Research from other pandemics, such as swine flu (H1N1), shows that low uptake of protective behaviours such as hand washing and social distancing were linked to a lack of public worry¹. Generating a sense of worry to motivate uptake of these behaviours is important, but we must be mindful of heightened levels of anxiety as they can lead to fear and a 'fight or flight' response. Fear can lead to denial and avoidance behaviours².
- 4 Identify what influences each preventive behaviour and ensure policies, messaging and interventions target all relevant drivers.** Behavioural drivers are linked to the **C**apability to enact (e.g. knowledge/skill), **O**ppportunity to *enable* (e.g. societal norms/physical resources) and **M**otivation to perform (e.g. desire/emotion/habit) the **B**ehaviour (**COM-B**^{3,4}). All should be present for behaviour to occur.
- 5 Clearly specify behaviours and their effectiveness.** Messages should give advice and instruction on clear behavioural actions and their related outcomes. Use appropriate language to avoid confusion and unintended consequences. The British Psychological Society supports the World Health Organization's change in policy to use the term *physical distancing*, rather than *social distancing*, in order not to discourage vital social interaction. Where official messages need to change over time, a clear rationale and set of actions should be provided.

- 6 **Avoid unintended negative consequences.** Policies, information and messaging may have unintended psycho-social and behavioural consequences (e.g. increased anxiety, widening social deprivation, social-isolation). *Know your target audience to avoid inequality.*
- 7 **Create clear channels of access for health literacy.** When anxiety is heightened, cognitive processing can be challenged. Information and messages from multiple channels can be overwhelming and thus more difficult to process. Provide information using clear communication, through accessible, credible and reliable channels.
- 8 **Use behavioural scientists and the psychological evidence base to support the Covid-19 response.** International leaders in psychology are already advising governments on the management and containment of the virus using behavioural strategies^{5,6}. The BPS Division of Health Psychology can connect professionals and organisations who are supporting local and national efforts in their Covid-19 response with psychological expertise. Through its network of volunteers, the Division can: offer advice and support for strategic development, policies and recommendations; evidence synthesis and rapid reviews, intervention design/evaluation; and upskilling of others in psychological approaches. To access this support, email communicationsdhp@bps.org.uk with the subject title 'Covid-19'.
- 9 **Make a pledge to work together, through a multidisciplinary approach.**
#COMBATCOVID19TOGETHER

REFERENCES

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- ² Chater, A. (2018, 20 March). Seven steps to overcoming your patient's 'fear of finding out'. *NursingStandard* [accessed online].
- ³ Michie, S., van Stralen, M.M. & West, R. (2011). The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Science, 6*. Article number 42.
- ⁴ Michie, S., Atkins, L. & West, R. (2014). *The behaviour change wheel: A guide to designing interventions*. London: Silverback.
- ⁵ Michie, S. (2020, 28 February). Behavioural science must be at the heart of the public health response to covid-19. *BMJ opinion*.
- ⁶ Michie, S. (2020, 3 March). Behavioural strategies for reducing covid-19 transmission in the general population. *BMJ opinion*.

TABLE 1: CORE BEHAVIOURS AND QUESTIONS TO ASK TO UNDERSTAND DRIVERS OF BEHAVIOUR AND DEVELOP POLICIES, INTERVENTIONS AND MESSAGING TO COMBAT COVID-19 TOGETHER

COMBAT COVID-19 TOGETHER	Capability	Opportunity	Motivation
<p>Clean your hands regularly with soap and water</p> <p>Open doors and handles using your elbows</p> <p>Make a plan to avoid unnecessarily leaving your home</p> <p>Bring alcohol-based hand sanitiser out with you</p> <p>Always stand 2 metres away from other people outside of your household</p> <p>Tissues – keep them on you and dispose of them immediately after use</p> <p>Cough into a tissue or, if not tissues, into your elbow</p> <p>Out of your mouth – keep hands away from your mouth, nose and eyes</p> <p>Video call friends and family, and work from home where possible</p> <p>Isolate if you have a new, persistent cough or have a temperature above 37.8°C*</p> <p>Develop a routine that works for you to follow official guidance</p>	<p>Why is this important?</p> <p>How can we ensure attention to the message?</p> <p>What skills are needed?</p> <p>How can we aid memory?</p> <p>What does a plan look like?</p>	<p>What environmental issues are there? (access to soap/ water/ internet/ tissue)?</p> <p>Who can help (social support)?</p> <p>What are others doing (social norms)?</p> <p>What social and physical challenges might there be (relationships religious/ financial)?</p>	<p>How much belief is there that it will work?</p> <p>How important is it?</p> <p>What roles does emotion play?</p> <p>How is this linked to identity?</p> <p>What habits/ unconscious processes need to be overcome?</p>

* If you have a **new**, persistent cough or have a temperature above 37.8C, isolate yourself for 7 days.
If you live with others who have these symptoms, you should all self-isolate for 14 days.

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