

# MOTIVATING SOCIAL DISTANCE DURING A PANDEMIC

People who are motivated by their own efficacy, rather than shame or guilt to promote social health, demonstrate the greatest intention to go through with social distancing.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, some countries had more success stopping the spread than others. This prompted some researchers to ask: What type of public health messaging best motivates people to abide by social distancing?

Crystal Reeck worked on an international research team that ran an experiment with more than 25,000 participants from nearly 90 different countries. After being given a public health message, research participants were asked about their motivation to comply with suggested health behaviors, their feelings of defiance and their intended behavior.

Reeck finds that *autonomy supported messaging*, which promotes people's efficacy to shape outcomes, reduces feeling of defiance. *Controlling messaging*, which uses guilt or shame to motivate people, increases feelings of defiance.

While the type of public health messaging did not change people's intentions to social distance, people's type of motivation did. People who reported more autonomous motivation were more likely to social distance, while those who reported more controlling motivation were less likely to social distance.

Leaders attempting to influence people's behavior should seek to promote feelings of efficacy rather than guilt or shame. Public leaders can use this information not only for future public health emergencies, but also for other purposes such as voter registration campaigns.

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## MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

- *Autonomy supported messaging* reduces people's feeling of defiance, while *controlling messaging* increases feelings of defiance.
- Autonomous motivation was positively associated with intentions to social distance, whereas controlling motivation was negatively associated with intentions to social distance.

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## WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

- Political leaders
- Public health authorities
- Communications professionals
- Marketing companies

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- A global experiment on motivating social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2111091119>