# BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE TIPS FOR COVID-19 COMMUNICATIONS

Human behavior plays a central role in reducing the spread of coronavirus.

Communication by government entities and other trusted sources about desirable or mandated behaviors during the pandemic is critical. As policymakers, funders, and program staff, it is our responsibility to ensure that communications are clear, concise, and accurate. We can go one step further with messaging that is behaviorally informed, contextually relevant, and communicated through novel delivery channels. Effective communication will ensure that everyone hears, understands, and follows guidance necessary for COVID-19 mitigation.

1 Make desired behaviors simple and easy to do.
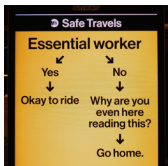
Prioritize a few, clear, achievable **actions** people can take in their everyday lives.

Provide a **checklist** or decision tree to help people make the right decision in unfamiliar or uncertain contexts (e.g., what to do if experiencing COVID-19 symptoms).

Offer **rituals** and familiar **routines** that make healthy behaviors a habit (e.g., suggest a well-known song to mark hand washing duration).

Deliver reminders or cues at the **point of action** when decisions are made, such as when entering public venues (e.g., signs to wash hands at entrances to buildings).

2 Make messages catchy and memorable.

Use **concrete visual imagery** (e.g., show how the virus is transmitted, or how distancing protects everyone). Messages that are easy to visualize are more likely to be remembered and enacted.

Use short, **catchy** phrases and slogans. Easily recalled phrases increase individuals' own action and are more likely to be repeated to others.

Use alliteration and **rhyme** (e.g., Stay Home, Save Lives).

Incorporate popular **local** expressions in messages.

Repeat the same slogan as often as possible and through different **channels**. Repetition increases people's recall and belief in a statement.

3 Appeal to people's social nature.

People are social creatures: We respond to public opinion and to normative behaviors—what we see other people are doing.

Publicize adherence (and don't highlight non-adherence) to recommendations like physical distancing or mask-wearing. We will cooperate with rules for the collective good as long as we believe most others are.

Motivate appropriate behaviors by making them **easily observed** by others (e.g., distribute yard signs that help people signal their commitment to staying home).
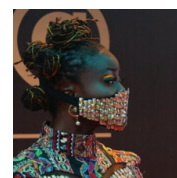
Engage political and community **leaders** and **celebrities** to share a united message (e.g., **religious leaders** can endorse physical distancing by advising people to pray at home rather than coming to mosque).

4 Promote collective action and cooperation.

Most people are naturally cooperative. Appeals to wide-spread cooperation are more successful than punitive measures.

Connect individuals' behavior to the well-being of others, particularly vulnerable groups (e.g., I wear a mask to protect my elderly granny).

To encourage people to take the pandemic seriously, use messages from essential workers who are **taking the greatest risks** (healthcare, retail, and factory workers).
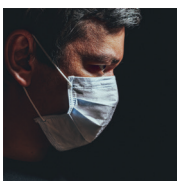
Frequently **acknowledge** and **thank** people for their cooperation.

Acknowledge the real **hardships** and crises that lockdowns create.

Praise those assisting their community in exceptional ways.

Use language that appeals to people's **sense of community:** "We", "all of us", "Ubuntu".

Avoid messages that provoke fear, panic, or stigma—this will cause people to avoid seeking care. Focus on positive, pro-social, actionable messages.

5 Maintain credibility and legitimacy.

To manage the pandemic effectively, the government needs to be seen as reliable, trusted, and capable—even when data are limited and the situation changes rapidly.
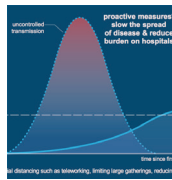
Prioritize **daily** communications from the most trusted leaders at a **consistent** time and in a consistent format.

Honesty is the best policy—it will increase the sense of trust and transparency.

Communicate **accurate** data about case counts, mortality, economic impact, and duration of restrictions.

When communicating timelines or estimates that are uncertain, emphasize the most **likely outcome** but also acknowledge ranges and extreme bounds.

Acknowledge that the situation is **dynamic:** information and guidelines may change.

To combat misinformation, **emphasize and repeat** the correct facts that people should know.

Remind the public to evaluate the credibility of sources before sharing.

We encourage **rapid-testing of messages when possible** since the design, wording, and framing of messages will have different effects across populations and settings.

Are you working on improving service delivery and tackling related problems during the COVID-19 pandemic in low and middle-income countries?

Would you like support in generating innovative solutions or adapting them to your context?

💬 **Reach out to us** *at support@ideas42.org and let's talk about strengthening your efforts in this evolving crisis.*