



drishti

Covid-19 & Behavioural Science

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This article is based on “Time has come to bring in necessary reforms in our social behaviour” which was published in the Livemint on 09/05/2021. It talks about the using social and behavioural science to support Covid-19 pandemic response.

It is now common knowledge that large gatherings of people serve as super-spreaders of the deadly coronavirus. Despite this, owing to religious & political factors, there have been many mass gatherings in recent times.

For instance, there was footage of women for kalash yatra to perform Jalabhishek at Navapura village in Gujarat’s Sanand. Also, Mahakumbh was organized in Haridwar under police protection, where millions of people take holy dip in River Ganga.

In this context, the Covid-19 crisis requires large-scale behaviour change and places significant psychological burdens on individuals, insights from the social and behavioural sciences to the response against the pandemic.

Therefore, apart from upgrading the healthcare system, the time has come when we should think of necessary reforms in our social behaviour.

Behavioural Dimensions of Pandemic

- **Threat:** One of the central emotional responses during a pandemic is fear. Humans, like other animals, possess a set of defensive systems for combating ecological threats.

Negative emotions resulting from threat can be contagious, and fear can make threats appear more imminent.

- **Optimism Bias:** There is a general perception in the public that bad things are less likely to befall oneself than others.

While optimism bias may be useful for avoiding negative emotions, it can lead people to underestimate their likelihood of contracting a disease and to therefore ignore public health warnings.

- **Prejudice and Discrimination:** The experience of fear and threat has ramifications not only for how people think about themselves, but also how they feel about and react to others—in particular, out-groups.
 - For instance, being threatened with disease is often associated with higher levels of ethnocentrism and greater intolerance toward out-groups.
 - This can undermine empathy with those who are socially distant and increase dehumanization.
- **Disaster and ‘Panic’:** There is a common belief in popular culture that, when in peril, people panic, especially when in crowds.
 - That is, they act blindly and excessively out of self-preservation, potentially endangering the survival of all.
 - This idea has been used to explain responses to the current Covid-19 outbreak, most commonly in relation to the notion of ‘panic buying’.
- **Social Norms:** People’s behaviour is influenced by social norms: what they perceive that others are doing or what they think that others approve or disapprove.
- **Social Inequality:** Inequalities in access to resources affect not only who is at greatest risk of infection, developing symptoms or succumbing to the disease, but also who is able to adopt recommendations to slow the spread of the disease.
- **Fake news and Misinformation:** Fake news and misinformation about Covid-19 have proliferated widely on social media, with potentially dangerous consequences.

Way Forward

Slowing viral transmission during pandemics requires significant shifts in behaviour. In this context:

- **Public Messages:** Changing behaviours by correcting such misperceptions can be achieved by public messages reinforcing positive (for example, health-promoting) norms.

Further, communication strategies must strike a balance between breaking through optimism bias without inducing excessive feelings of anxiety and dread.
- **Nudge Theory:** Another way to leverage the impact of norms falls under the general category of ‘nudges’, which influence behaviour through modification of choice architecture .

For instance, a message with compelling social norms might say, ‘the overwhelming majority of people in your community believe that everyone should stay home’.

- **Fighting Fake News:** Fighting misinformation requires a preventative approach involving subtle prompts that nudge people to consider accuracy.
 - For example, periodically asking users to rate the accuracy of randomly selected posts.
 - The crowdsourced accuracy ratings generated by this process may also be useful for identifying misinformation, as has been found for crowd ratings of source trustworthiness.
- **Persuasion:** Several messaging approaches may be effective, including emphasizing the benefits to the recipient, focusing on protecting others. For example, ‘wash your hands to protect your parents and grandparents’.
Also, communication aligning with the recipient’s moral values, appealing to social consensus or scientific norms, may help.
- **Leadership:** Crises like the Covid-19 pandemic create an opportunity for leadership across groups of varying levels: families, workplaces, local communities and nations. Leadership can coordinate individuals and help them avoid behaviours that are no longer considered socially responsible.

Conclusion

A recent report from the World Health Organization declared that “health communication is seen to have relevance for virtually every aspect of health and well-being, including disease prevention, health promotion and quality of life.”

Urgent action is needed to mitigate the potentially devastating effects of COVID-19, action that can be supported by the behavioural and social sciences.

Drishti Mains Question

In order to deal with pandemics, apart from upgrading the healthcare system, the time has come when we should think of necessary reforms in our social behaviour. Comment.
