

A Nudge in the Right Direction: How to Encourage Protective Behavior Against COVID-19

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Executive Summary

After quarantine restrictions ease, life under the constant threat of COVID-19 will begin a new normal where each one must do their part in guarding against infection. This study aimed (1) to create a guide for behavioral change through a scoping literature review and analysis of interventions on choice architecture and (2) to recommend further directions for knowledge building on this matter.

Recommendations

- **Explore behavioral economic tools in creating public health strategies.** Developing knowledge of behavioral science for public health is a step towards more sustainable population health.
- **Engage and coordinate with different sectors to formulate behavioral interventions.** Involving various perspectives will aid in designing more effective and comprehensive behavioral interventions.
- **Build platforms, programs, and activities for habit formation.** Methods to support the process of building habits will further facilitate positive behavioral change in the individual and community.

Introduction

To protect oneself from infection with COVID-19, the following four behaviors were recommended for further integration into daily habits: (1) hand washing, (2) physical distancing, (3) cleaning, and (4) proper cough etiquette with avoiding touching of the face.¹ Measures that encourage people to choose to continue these behaviors will favor its sustainability. Choice architecture, a behavioral economic principle, demonstrates that organizing the context in which people make decisions can nudge people towards doing target actions.² This can be done by creating default behaviors, expecting errors, giving feedback, understanding and making simpler choices, and providing incentives.

Results & Discussion

These four target behaviors can be encouraged amongst the general population with the proper interventions put in place to facilitate them. A scoping review of proven studies and expert insights

¹Susan Michie et al, "Slowing down the covid-19 outbreak: changing behaviour by understanding it", *The BMJ Opinion* (blog), *The British Medical Journal*, March 11, 2020, <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/03/11/slowing-down-the-covid-19-outbreak-changing-behaviour-by-understanding-it>

²Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions Using the Architecture of Choice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008)

on behavioral change has shown opportunities and platforms upon which building protective behavior can begin.

I. Hand Washing

- a. Provide hand washing stations, soaps, sanitizers and other cues in convenient, visible, and accessible locations.
- b. Create reminder systems and give feedback (e.g., scheduled notifications, infographics) on handwashing frequency & disease incidence.
- c. Modify promotional materials according to the target audience (e.g. sink mirrors for children, disgust-evoking images for men).
- d. Offer various hand hygiene options (e.g., soap dispensers, electronic dispensers) in restrooms and other areas.
- e. Incentivize hand hygiene (e.g. placing toys in the middle of soaps for children, scented soaps for adults).

II. Physical Distancing

- a. Restructure business and school activities to utilize online platforms as a default option.
- b. Create staggered work schedules, public visitation schedules, and limit entry of persons to control unavoidable influx of people.
- c. Reallocate more space for pedestrians and cyclists.
- d. Redesign spaces using visual aids (e.g., gridlines, tape) to discourage crowding.
- e. Use schematic visual cues to map out distances (e.g., feet cut-outs, 3D simulation apps) and navigation assistance tools to direct movement of foot traffic and avoid crowding.
- f. Use concern for others' safety to encourage social distancing in slogans, and advertisements placed in public transportation or queuing areas.

III. Cleaning

- a. Implement cleaning programs. Assign leaders to oversee the setting of schedules, monitoring of cleanliness, and provision of feedback.
- b. Identify areas of responsibility for each individual. Use scheduled prompts and ensure access to cleaning tools.
- c. Communicate (via memos, infographics) specific instructions on how to clean frequently touched objects (e.g., keyboards, doorknobs).
- d. Emphasize how good sanitation practices lead to non-health consequences (e.g. less employee sick leaves lead to increased company productivity).
- e. Incentivize good cleaning practices through praise or rewards (e.g. certificates).

IV. Coughing Etiquette/Avoid Touching of Face

- a. Use audiovisual cues to promote proper cough etiquette and hygienic habits to children (e.g. pictorial flipcharts, short songs).
- b. Provide access to face-touching alternatives by encouraging use of tissues, stress balls, fidget spinners, masks, gloves, or glasses.
- c. Foster awareness of face-touching by encouraging people to explicitly monitor themselves and others. Place mirrors on desks, use personal diaries, or make it a challenge with others.
- d. Communicate the impact of proper cough etiquette on others (e.g. dynamic images illustrating the spread of cough particles).
- e. Compare the movements of proper cough etiquette to dance moves.

V. General

- a. Constantly inform the public and create evidence-based information campaigns that are visually appealing (e.g., use figures, symbols), concise (step-by-step), and easy-to-remember.

- b. Integrate disease prevention and control practices in school rules, education curriculum, employee training guidelines, and work policies.
- c. Influence and model health behaviors in organizations. Implement workshops/seminars, create standard procedures, and communicate exemplary actions of leaders.
- d. Incentivize behaviors through timely and consistent recognition (e.g. giving points).
- e. Make rules of thumb information for practicing certain behaviors (e.g., sanitize hands after every class, specific number of meeting attendees).

Table 1. Nudges Matrix on How to Encourage Protective Behavior

	Hand washing	Physical Distancing	Cleaning	Cough Etiquette/ Avoiding Face Touch	General
Create Default Options	Visible, accessible, & convenient wash stations	Online platforms for school and work	Programs/ Leaders	Stress Balls, Fidget Spinners	School rules, Employee training
Expect Error	Checklists, Timed reminders	Staggered schedules	Scheduled prompts	Masks, Gloves, Eyeglasses	Visible designs
Give Feedback	Results/Reports	Visual prompts	Step-by-step Instructions	Mirrors, Games/Challenges	Constant public information
Understand Mappings	Target-specific promotions	Schematic visual cues	Visual Markers	Personal diaries	Factual and simple information
Structure Choices	Various hand hygiene options	Assisted navigation	Assignments /Schedules	Dance moves	Rules of thumb
Provide Incentives	Soap toys, scented soaps	Safety ads in public areas	Certificates, Points	Images of cough particles	Consistent reward and recognition

Recommendations

- I. **Explore the role of behavioral economics as a tool for public health strategies.** Nudges to behavior can be effective tools to incite individual and collective action towards public health. Health authorities should further conduct research and experiment in this field, not only for the issue of COVID-19 but for other concerns in population health as well.
- II. **Engage various sectors in formulating behavioral interventions that are contextualized to their setting.** Different sectors present with barriers to behavior that are unique to their own setting. Understanding these play a crucial role in designing more effective behavioral interventions to nudge people towards the right actions and behavior.
- III. **Invest in platforms and activities for habit formation, especially in the younger populations.** Starting good habits at a young age is more likely to follow through to adulthood. This is significant in creating a healthier and safer community for everyone. Both educational institutions and social support should be involved to ensure continuity and greater awareness of behavioral learning both inside and outside of the classroom.

Conclusion

Choice architecture can play a role in keeping public health safety by nudging individuals to make the right decisions. There are various ways to encourage hand washing, physical distancing, cleaning, proper cough etiquette, or avoiding touching of the face but this will require the support of organizations, communities, and institutions. As a new normal begins for everyone, collective action through small behavioral changes is a way to foster better health in society, now and beyond the threat of COVID-19.