

5 Tips to gain public compliance to Covid-19 regulations- Dr. Moran Bodas

1. Most unvaccinated individuals, especially those who have yet to take the third dose, are not against the vaccine or are driven by conspiracy theories. They are mostly confused people, thrown from side to side by the raging debate on social media and among their close circles concerning the pros and cons of the vaccine. The emotional, heated discourse often leads these individuals to assume a position of hesitancy, which in turn leads to procrastination. If the arguments are conceived as too scary, they might result in denial being used as an adaptive coping mechanism. Either way, the result is the same - they don't get the shot. Not making a decision is also a decision, and in this case, it is a bad one, since we know the vaccine is safe and effective.

2. Using fear appeal is the wrong way to communicate the risk and bringing about behavioral change. A recent study from 2014 by Ruiter et al., who examined 60 years (!) of fear appeal studies in health behavior context, found that (p.63): *“...coping information aimed at **increasing perceptions of response effectiveness and especially self-efficacy is more important in promoting protective action** than presenting threatening health information aimed at **increasing risk perceptions and fear arousal**. Alternative behavior change methods than fear appeals should be considered.”*

3. Human beings are the only species on this planet to be aware of our own demise. No Giraffe realms the Serengeti thinking this might be its last day on earth, but people do. This awareness of death generates a horror that we have learned to succumb through physiologically identified mechanisms, developed through years of evolution. When you threaten a person about a risk, which is perceived as existential, using fear appeal messages, you are essentially triggering these defense mechanisms into action. In turn, these mechanisms shut down your brain and prevent the message from registering. This is the primary reason why fear tactics don't work during crises and emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. What does work? Messages of empowerment, optimism, and self-efficacy. Positive reinforcers are more capable of generating behavioral change than negative punishments. Wrapping risk communication in bright colors of optimistic approach and using messages that encourage people to take simple actions that bear a significant contribution to themselves and others is far better in achieving sustainable change. Turning the discourse from an emotional one to a rational one, particularly a cost-benefit analysis, is also expected to contribute to behavioral change. In essence, this means that people should be taught about the effectiveness of the behavior they are asked to perform and the benefits they will reap if they do. "Get vaccinated so that you do not lose your green pass" is a better message than "if you don't get the shot you are more likely to die".

5. Perhaps most important is that risk communicators and decision-makers need to acknowledge the fact that we've now entered a new phase of the crisis. It is no longer an acute emergency, in which do's and don'ts are the primary tools for communication. COVID-19 has now been integrated into our lives, and who knows how long it will last? Under such circumstances, that the threat becomes chronic, risk communication needs to adapt as well. Primarily, it should shift from life-saving instruction to shaping social norms. People should be bombarded with messages of normative behavior and its importance in maintaining social cohesion. Messages such as "by wearing a mask you are protecting others" and "when you take the vaccine you contribute to reducing the burden in hospitals" are the way to go. Shaping social norms is the key to ensuring a sustainable change in human behavior - just like we do risk communication to prevent drunk driving and road traffic collisions.

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