

Matt Hancock
Secretary of State for Health
39 Victoria St
Westminster
SW1H 0EU

To Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health.

We write to express our concern about the content, tone, and delivery of the government's messages designed to address a possible "second wave" of Covid-19.

We recognise the need to encourage continued public vigilance, and the promotion of safe behaviour. Some messages being used by the government, however, are designed to increase fear which will likely lead to increased rates of anxiety, stress, and depression [i].

A paper by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) behavioural science sub-group SPI-B discussed at the March 23 2020 meeting records that in order to encourage conformity with social distancing and other anti-Covid measures the "perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased ... using hard-hitting emotional messaging". The proposed adaptations to messaging were welcomed by policymakers [ii]. With the government concerned about the prospect of a second-wave, this approach is now again being adopted and amplified by the media. In recent days government Ministers have sought to imply that the behaviour of younger generations could lead to the deaths of their grandparents and that family Christmas's will have to be cancelled if "young people" do not behave more responsibly.

The claim made in the SAGE minutes that the "perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased" is concerning:

- Those already living with a degree of anxiety or stress do not need to have their fear-level elevated further by threat-based messaging. There is evidence that rates of anxiety have increased [iii] and depression [iv] has doubled during the pandemic. Fear messages will be particularly potent for the elderly who are frightened to go out, parents who are concerned about sending their children back to school, and people who are wary of using public transport or returning to work or education.
- For those for whom the messaging is effective it will be extremely difficult to reverse its potent threat effect, with the 'hard hitting emotional message' likely to long outlive the actual danger of Covid [v]. This is 'biological preparedness', a form of selective learning that enables the human brain to very quickly associate threat with certain stimuli. Once learnt, this fear response is tremendously difficult to unlearn and, as evidence shows, one of the main antecedents of anxiety and phobias.
- The people that the government needs to engage with their Covid guidance will not be won-over by fear-based messaging. Research has shown that some individuals will at best ignore fear-based messages or at worst can be goaded into even-greater displays of irresponsibility [vi]. Pictures of lung cancer on packages of cigarettes did not stop smoking and capital punishment did not stop people committing crimes. Additionally, shaming and blaming the young, while asking them to make sacrifices (essentially curtailing their social development and relationship formations) could also result in the exact opposite of the behaviours desired by the government. It is essential that we understand the impact of

lockdown on the typical behaviours of the young, who are biologically orientated at this point in their lives to be highly social, develop peer group relationships, and sexual partners. These kinds of behaviour are different to their older peers. The government needs to show a much greater empathic awareness for young people who are being robbed of the opportunities and joys of their youth.

We therefore recommend:

- A reframing of the general message being communicated by the government. The government must acknowledge the pain and suffering that people are experiencing and the anxiety that Covid, and the lifting of restrictions, has caused for some. When a speaker validates their audience's experiences and shows empathic resonance with them, the audience is much more receptive to the message being conveyed.
- A switch to more targeted messaging. Broadcasting a hard-hitting message to the population at-large risks the mental wellbeing of individuals prone to or suffering from anxiety, depression, and stress. Such deleterious effects could be avoided by broadcasting messages through the mediums the target audience is most likely to read or listen to.
- There needs to be far more extensive research into subgroups to explore what messages would support and encourage them to behave in the ways that require extensive personal sacrifice of their usual lifestyle. Those conveying the message must be from the same group so they can see that it is a mutually shared burden. Messages should be communicated by individuals that the target audience identifies with. Hearing fear-based messages from older, authoritarian figures is likely to reduce engagement. We should also avoid making assumptions about certain population groups. The evidence is that the majority of young people actually comply. In addition, we should explore the contributions young people, can and are making to control the virus, empowering rather than shaming them.

We understand that we are all under great pressure to reduce the spread of Covid-19, and it is with that aspiration that we highlight the fact that behaviour change is not straight forward. Each one of us has a contribution to make and identifying the problem with a specific group could undermine the spirit of togetherness that will help us through this difficult time. We cannot create an 'us' and 'them' because we will all be weaker for it.

Yours,

Dr Frances Maratos, Reader and Associate Professor in Emotion Science, University of Derby

Prof Miles Richardson, Professor of Human Factors and Nature Connectedness, University of Derby

Jennifer Nadel, Co-Director of Compassion in Politics

Dr Jane Montague, Head of Psychology, University of Derby

Prof Manuela Barreto, Head of Psychology, University of Exeter

Dr Chris Pawson, Head of Psychology, University of the West of England

Dr Peter Hills, Head of Psychology, University of Bournemouth

Dr Jo Yarker, Senior Lecturer in Organisational Psychology, Birkbeck, University of London

Professor Arash Sahraie, Head of Psychology, University of Aberdeen

Prof Paul Gilbert OBE, Professor of Clinical Psychology, University of Derby

Dr William van Gordon, Associate Professor in Contemplative Psychology, University of Derby

Gavin Cullen, Mental Health Lecturer, Edinburgh Napier University

Professor Almuth McDowall, Assistant Dean, Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck University of London

Dr Tim Chapman, Clinical Psychologist, Newcastle University

Dr Laura Twist, Lancaster University

Dr Bruno Carraça, FMH-Lisbon University

Dr Matthew Owens, Lecturer in Psychology, University of Exeter

Dr Miles Thompson, Clinical Psychologist and Senior Lecturer in Psychology, UWE Bristol

Lexy Newbold, Psychology Research Fellow, University of Exeter

Julian Bath, Programme Manager, Professional Doctorate in Health Psychology, University of the West of England

Christine Ramsey-Wade, Senior Lecturer in Counselling Psychology, University of the West of England

Dr Sigrid Lipka, Associate Professor in Psychology, University of Derby

Dr Jennifer Lay, Lecturer in Psychology, University of Exeter

Dr Jennifer Ferrell, Programme Lead, Psychology, University of the West of England

Daniel Gaffiero, Associate Lecturer in Psychology, University of Derby

Prof Linden J Ball, Director of Research, School of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire

Dr Carrie Childs, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Derby

Katherine Weare, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of Southampton

Dr Thomas Hunt, Associate Professor in Psychology, University of Derby

David Gamblin, Lecturer, Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck, University of London

James Elander, Professor of Health Psychology, University of Derby

Prof Aimee Aubeluck, Head of Health Sciences, University of Nottingham

Dr Theo Gilbert, Associate Professor, University of Hertfordshire

Dr Caroline Harvey, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Derby

Dr Julia Kleckham, Clinical Psychologist, Homerton University Hospital Trust

Andrew Jackson, CEO, ProReal Ltd

Dr Carrie Baker, Clinical Psychologist

Dr Ken Goss, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership Trust

Jacqueline E Woodward, Psychotherapist

Gavin Robinson, Counsellor and therapist

Jane O'Rourke, Founder of MINDinMIND

Dr Naomi Bright, Clinical psychologist, Humber Teaching NHS Trust

Dr Jenny Lloyd, Clinical psychologist, Derby Hospital

Dr Steve Williams, CBT Practitioner

Dr Alan Kellas, MRCPsych Psychiatrist

Sandy Juric, Psychotherapist, Edify Psychology Services

Dr Olivia Thrift, The Psychology Company

Dr Kate Brierton, Clinical Psychologist, Compassionate Cambridge

Maria Law, BABCP Accredited CBT Psychotherapist

Louise Chester, Mindfulness at Work

Dr Jessica Bockler, Alef Trust

Angela Kennedy, Consultant Psychologist

Dr Ashleigh McLellan, Clinical Psychologist, Ubuntu Psychology Ltd

Dr Amanda Super, Chartered Occupational Psychologist

Dr. Tamara Russell, Clinical Psychologist, Director, Mindfulness Centre of Excellence.

Dr Hannah Gilbert, Compassionate Mind Foundation

Dr Mary Welford, CEO, Compassion in Mind.

[i] Stollow, J. A., Moses, L. M., Lederer, A. M., & Carter, R. (2020). How Fear Appeal Approaches in COVID-19 Health Communication May Be Harming the Global Community. *Health Education & Behavior*, 1090198120935073.

[ii] Michie, S., West, R., Rogers, M. B., Bonell, C., Rubin, G. J., & Amlôt, R. (2020). Reducing SARS-CoV-2 transmission in the UK: A behavioural science approach to identifying options for increasing adherence to social distancing and shielding vulnerable people. *British Journal of Health Psychology*.

[iii] <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14874>

[iv]

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/coronavirusanddepressioninadultsgreatbritain/june2020>

[v] Hastings, G., Stead, M., Webb, J. (2004). Fear appeals in social marketing: Strategic and ethical reasons for concern. *Psychology and Marketing*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20043>

[vi] Richins, M. T., Barreto, M., Karl, A., & Lawrence, N. (2019). Incidental fear reduces empathy for an out-group's pain. *Emotion*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/em00000714>