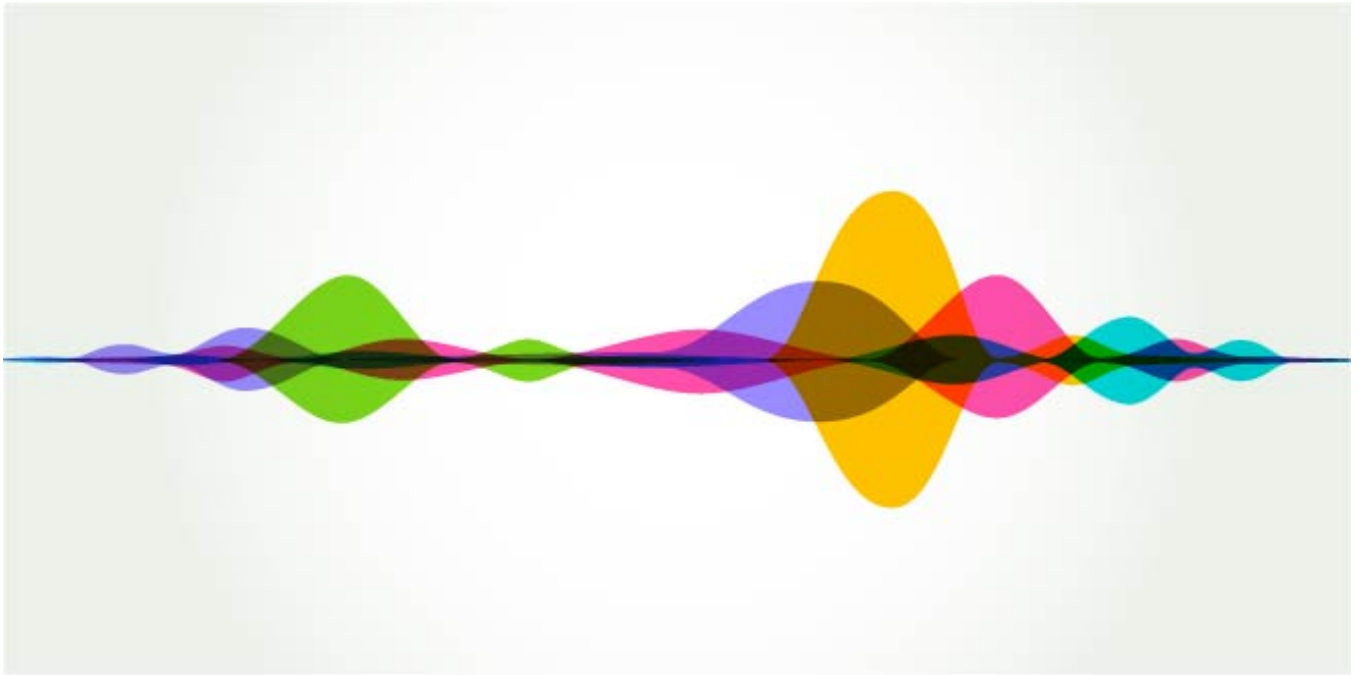


Psychological Science and Epidemics: Voices of Experts

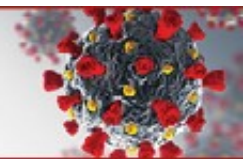
March 16, 2020



In news stories and opinion pieces, psychological scientists are sharing evidence-based insights on public reactions to epidemics and the viral nature of news and information, particularly as they pertain to COVID-19.

APS welcomes and encourages additional content to include on this page. Feel free to forward recommendations to news@psychologicalscience.org. See the latest media appearances by [APS members](#).

Visit APS's main COVID-19 page for more psychological science research and insights.



In an opinion piece in the *Boston Globe*, APS Fellow and Board Member **Michele Gelfand** (University of Maryland) discussed challenges unique to the United States.

[“While social distancing, better hygiene, and flat-out travel bans may help, we have yet to address one of our biggest vulnerabilities: America’s traditionally loose culture. The decentralized, defiant, do-it-your-own-way norms that make our country so entrepreneurial and creative also deepen our danger during the coronavirus crisis. To fight this pandemic, we can’t just shift our resources; we have to shift our cultural patterns as well.”](#)

In an article published in the *Washington Post*, APS Fellow and Janet Taylor Spence Award recipient

Elliot Berkman (University of Oregon) is quoted as saying:

“Habit change is very, very difficult. We’re designed to build habits. When you try to break habits, you’re working upstream against your own evolutionary history. It’s not enough to simply instruct people to stop, people must be able to ‘outsmart their habit’ or form a different one. One way to do that quickly is to change something in your environment. Wear something on your hands or face (just not a mask if you’re not sick) that can serve as a cue, an interruption to an automatic action.”

APS Fellow **Gretchen Chapman** (Carnegie Mellon University) discussed social distancing in an article in *Slate*.

“You’re looking around to see what people are doing,” says Chapman. “If you take your cues from other people, you might be more inclined to take strong action yourself because you see other people doing it.” “If your worldview is that you’re always asked to make sacrifices and you never get anything out of it, maybe you don’t want to comply with this request. But if you have a worldview that tells you it’s important to help others, then maybe you’re happy to make these sacrifices.”

APS Fellow **David DeSteno** (University of Maryland) is quoted in *The New York Times* and *Quartz*:

“The answer is a mix of miscalibrated emotion and limited knowledge. As news about the virus’s toll in China stokes our fears, it makes us not only more worried than we need be about contracting it, but also more susceptible to embracing fake claims and potentially problematic, hostile or fearful attitudes toward those around us—claims and attitudes that in turn reinforce our fear and amp up the cycle.”

In a *CNN* article, APS Fellow **Frank Farley** (Temple University) is quoted:

“[The novel coronavirus] is engendering a sort of survivalist psychology, where we must live as much as possible at home and thus must ‘stock up’ on essentials, and that certainly includes toilet paper. After all, if we run out of [toilet paper], what do we replace it with?”

APS Fellow **Julianne Holt-Lunstad** and **Chris Segrin** provided insights on social distancing in *Science* magazine.

“[...] having a friend present can reduce a person’s cardiovascular response to a stressful task. There’s even a correlation between perceived social connectedness and stress responses. “Just knowing that you have someone you can count on if needed is enough to dampen some of those responses even if [that person is] not physically present.” — Holt-Lunstad

[“Someone who is already having problems with, say, social anxiety, depression, loneliness, substance abuse, or other health problems is going to be particularly vulnerable.” — Segrin](#)

In an op-ed in the Seattle Times, APS Fellow **Lori Zoellner** (University of Washington) and her colleagues write:

[Anxiety and fear have survival value: to prepare and protect. So, what else can we do to not let COVID-19 fears go from helpful to harmful? Or lead us to carelessness or complacency? Tools from evidence-based psychotherapy highlight key principles.](#)

APS Fellow **Charissa Cheah** was quoted in a *Washington Post* article exploring racial overtones in certain rhetoric.

[“It’s not just the fear and targeting of a group of people who have a higher risk of infecting you. You’re not reacting to a specific health threat, but are generalizing it to a group of people and labeling all of them as dangerous and deserving of exclusion and poor treatment.”](#)

APS has several Research Topics with additional relevant information: [Epidemics and Public Health Behavior](#), [Misinformation](#), and [Risk](#).