LIVES IMPACT

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY MOBILISE PROTECTIVE, SUPPORTIVE AND RESILIENT BEHAVIOURS IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

SUMMARY OF KNOWLEDGE AND A SHORT GUIDE FOR PUBLIC ACTION

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SUMMARY

Aimed at all the actors involved in coordinating public action during the current health crisis, this guide presents 10 practical tips based on 10 scientific findings to mobilise 3 types of social behaviour: protection, solidarity and resilience.

CONTEXT

In order to curb the progression of the coronavirus pandemic, the Swiss authorities, like most European countries, have called on the population to adopt social distancing behaviours and have taken a series of health measures to slow down the country. On 20 March 2020, Alain Berset articulated the Federal Council's vision that the success of these measures, which aims at avoiding a health catastrophe, will depend on the ability to mobilize an effective, drastic, rapid and sustained change in behaviour throughout the population: «What counts from now on will be the population›s adoption of these measures for several weeks».

The current challenge is therefore to build, as a matter of urgency, public action capable of mobilising three types of social behaviour, on which the course of the health crisis and its attending human impact will depend:
- protective behaviours, i.e. compliance with public health

recommendations and social distancing in particular
- supportive behaviours, in particular solidarity with vulnerable people and a commitment to the continuity of essential services
- resilient behaviours, in order to prevent secondary damage generated by the distressing situation or by inappropriate collective responses

The current document aims to support all the actors involved in coordinating public action during this health crisis, in their difficult task of effectively mobilizing these three types of prosocial behaviours. It is based on an up-to-date review of the international literature in social psychology and related social sciences. The first part presents a ten-point summary of the relevant scientific findings and the second part seeks to extrapolate useful advice from each point to aide public decision-making in the current crisis.

Scientific Findings

1. The malleability of social behaviour increases exponentially in times of crisis.

In periods of relative social stability, social behaviours are often overdetermined by a set of factors: personal values, material constraints, laws, social norms, etc. This implies that a change in one of these factors is often absorbed and compensated for by the stability of the other factors, which can give the impression of a strong steadiness, or even inertia, in terms of social behaviour (1, 2). However, this intuitive understanding of the predictability of social behaviour cannot be extrapolated to what happens in times of crisis. When a population is faced with a major upheaval in their daily lives, it may happen that the shock simultaneously affects several or even all of the determinants of social behaviour. We then move from a social dynamic in which interactions between multiple factors temper change to a social dynamic in which they accelerate change (1, 3, 4). The extreme malleability of the resulting behaviours is sometimes seen as a source of potential disorder in times of crisis (5). However, it also facilitates the adaptation of behaviours to new imperatives, on a scale and at a speed that would be inconceivable in normal circumstances.

2. Perceived social norms play a critical role in accelerating change.

Among the various factors at play, perceived social norms play a particular role in the dynamics of accelerating change. Faced with new obligations, most people will adapt their behaviour in line with the prevailing reaction in the communities to which they belong (6-8). While it is sometimes possible to observe directly the reactions of one's neighbours or to discuss them with those close to one's heart (9), the perception of social norms within the broader communities to which people belong ("the Swiss", "my generation", "my profession", etc.) is inevitably publicised by the media, all the more so as in a climate of uncertainty self-censorship tends to become widespread with regard to the expression of personal positions (10, 11). Consequently, to the extent that only a small amount of information rapidly reaches a large number of people, it can have a disproportionate impact on the perception of social norms and, therefore, affect behaviour with a critical mass sufficient to unleash a spiralling effect. The information provided by the authorities is part of this key information, together with the coverage of events by the mainstream media.

3. Impractical regulations are likely to produce counterproductive effects.

Legal regulations are only effective if they are applicable in practice; otherwise they can trigger paradoxical effects. Formal orders that are systematically transgressed can generate unfortunate cascades: ambiguity created by norms that are not being respected may have a spill-over effect upon other norms and facilitate the spread of incivility or law-breaking behaviour (12, 13). In extreme cases, such spirals of transgression have even led to the trivialisation of violent crimes (14). However, the reverse also seems to be true: in social environments where the social norms practised are largely congruent with prescribed norms, compliance with rules is also likely to spread from one domain to another (8).

4. Adherence to the authorities' instructions is reinforced by the perception of a common identity with the persons issuing or relaying the instructions.

Orders to change behaviour and make sacrifices are more likely to generate an intrinsic motivation to comply when they are perceived as coming from "one of us" (15, 16). In a large population, feelings of belonging are generally varied; they differ between individuals and situations. The same source may therefore generate strong support for the message with one sub-section of the population at a given time, while being perceived as an outsider's voice for other people or in different circumstances (17). Support for political leaders tends to increase at the onset of a major crisis, but this phenomenon may be temporary and is rarely of such significance that leaders alone are able to generate sufficient buy-in across all social groups and sectors of the population (18).

5. The search for a sense of collective continuity is a powerful source of social motivation.

The feeling of belonging to collectives that have endured through time is a fundamental point of reference for human activity (19). The importance of social affiliations still grows in the face of existential threats, and the feeling of collective continuity is all the more sought-after when this continuity is challenged by events (20, 21). The way in which communities mobilise to deal with a current crisis depends on how they relate the challenges posed by the crisis to a common understanding of their history and collective trajectory (22).

6. Even in a life-threatening emergency, ordinary social roles and relationships are generally preserved and continue to guide social interactions.

Research on behaviours during life-threatening emergencies - such as attacks, fires or other disasters - shows that even in these extreme circumstances, selfish or irrational panic behaviour is much rarer than spontaneous helping behaviour (23-25). In most cases, people who suddenly find themselves in a situation of great danger, either to themselves or others, will continue to respect ordinary social codes, for example by being altruistic towards their loved ones or by helping first people perceived as vulnerable, such as the elderly or children, even when they are strangers (25, 26).

7. The crisis situation is at the origin of emerging communities of solidarity, capable of generating critical social resources.

Studies of people exposed to violent assaults or natural disasters have revealed the phenomenon of survivor communities: people who did not know each other before can develop a strong sense of belonging to a community of fate, created by the dangerous event (17, 27). The feeling of all being in the same boat facilitates mutual support during the crisis. Sometimes it is maintained over time and facilitates long-term solidarity. (28).

8. The momentum of solidarity can be fragile when crisis management creates or reinforces inequalities.

The main obstacle to the emergence or maintenance of a sense of common fate in the face of danger stems from an unequal distribution of risks and burdens (29, 30). When

certain sub-groups feel invulnerable, the sentiment of all being in the same boat is reduced. When part of the population escapes the effort required of all or, worse, exploits the crisis to profit from it, the social incentives for making sacrifices tend to be eroded (31). Sometimes, the feeling of spontaneous solidarity fails to find concrete expression because the political management of the crisis tends to divide people whom the danger could have brought together (23). In these different cases, bonds of solidarity may prove too fragile to allow for appropriate collective mobilisation.

9. Confusion and lack of information are more difficult to manage than shared truths, even dramatic ones.

Faced with situations of existential uncertainty, most people redouble their efforts to preserve a shared and coherent vision of social reality (32, 33). Not being able to receive and to pass on consistent information, nor to share its meaning with significant others, can be the cause of a distressing loss of one's bearings for those concerned and will increase the volatility of social behaviour (7, 34, 35).

10. Preservation of social ties is a critical resilience factor in times of significant stress.

It is well established that social isolation affects the ability of the people concerned to cope with stressful situations and significantly weakens their health. People who are socially well integrated and live in a community with strong social cohesion are less likely to have their physical and mental health affected, especially when they have to cope with particularly stressful events (31, 36-39).

Practical Advice

1. Anticipate that everything can change rapidly

When the context and social behaviours change in an accelerated and often unpredictable manner, it is fundamental to reserve room for manoeuvre in order to continuously adapt actions and instructions to the course of events. Communicating about the necessary evolving nature of the measures taken helps to prepare the population and to preserve a certain serenity when everything is changing very quickly, by generating an understanding that adapting measures is a sign of responsiveness rather than of inconsistency .

2. Make constructive behaviour visible

Behaviours encouraged by the authorities and the media influence the perception of social norms and thus provide points of reference according to which each person will direct his or her own conduct. Calls to change behaviour by pointing the finger at bad behaviour are often counterproductive. For example, the mere message that "young people don't follow the recommendations enough" is likely to spread above all the impression that it is normal for a young person not to follow the recommendations. There are a number of ways to avoid this pitfall, while at the same time pointing out what is problematic: communicating the trend (e.g., "many youths have already adapted their behaviour in a short period of time, but we need to move faster and farther now"), varying reference groups, (e.g., "the people of this canton are ahead within their generation"), or contextualize the observed behaviours by emphasizing their malleability (e.g., "in recent days, the information has not yet reached everyone, but those

who have heard the message are ready to change").

3. Favour clear and practical instructions

When new instructions are issued to the public, it is crucial to ensure that the behaviours requested are clearly identifiable and workable for everyone. Ambiguous instructions (leaving a large grey area between what is permitted or desired and what is not) or double binds (cconflicting instructions, without it being clear which one takes precedence) risk being counterproductive and blurring, or even thwarting, the dynamics of collective change. Such a principle of realism does not imply that injunctions should be limited: on the contrary, more forceful measures may facilitate a clearer reading of rules and priorities than more timid measures, provided that their objective and logic are understandable.

4. Mobilising inclusive role models

Since adherence to messages depends to a large extent on identifying with the source, the persuasive power of instructions can be significantly enhanced when they are relayed by a range of people who are likely to be accepted as "one of us" across the different target groups, and to credibly embody the respective common identities (e.g., youth and seniors, residents and cross-border workers, employees and employers, etc.). It is also important to avoid, as far as possible, having law enforcement agencies responsible for enforcing the instructions being placed in situations that could make them appear antagonistic to the specific groups, either by their attributes or actions (e.g. avoid a group of adolescent girls being dispersed only by older male officers, avoid non-French-speaking soldiers being the spokespeople to the public of French-speaking Switzerland, avoid armed agents intervening at a religious site, etc.).

5. Recall the ordeals overcome

General calls to "remain calm" are often of little use. It is more motivating and reassuring to highlight past and present experiences that testify to the collective capacity to respond to the challenge. For example, it can be effective to show that what is required is in continuity with cherished everyday roles and identities , even if it implies to surpass oneself in what one already knows how to do best (e.g., helping loved ones, caring for the sick, bringing food, communicating creatively, etc.). When historical narratives are accessible and charged with meaning in the collective memories, their invocation can also serve to inspire and encourage. It is important, however, to be attentive to forced analogies, or to those that are overly dramatic.

6. Avoid perpetuating the myth of "collective panic"

There is no real basis for the fear that the population may panic on a large scale in the face of danger and adopt purely selfish or irrational behaviour. It is entirely possible to rely on the shared values of civic-mindedness as a social resource in managing the crisis and to address people as bearers of responsibilities and loyalties within the fabric of their social relationships. On the other hand, media coverage and exaggeration of the meaning of certain unusual behaviours (e.g., looping coverage of empty shelves) can cause concern in a context of uncertainty and, at worst, reinforce the behaviours in question through a cascade effect. It is therefore important to contextualize this type of information in a systematic and proactive way, for

example by recalling the range of responsible behaviours adopted elsewhere, by insisting, where appropriate, on the anecdotal nature of certain over-publicised behaviours and/or by explaining how their impact can be contained.

7. Let spontaneous solidarity be expressed

As the crisis can hardly be overcome without a broad mobilisation of solidarity, spontaneous initiatives should primarily be treated as manifestations of goodwill which can lead to new solutions, even when they appear to be potential sources of disorder in the eyes of public authorities. It is vital to allow spontaneous self-help initiatives to express themselves, to give them visibility and to acknowledge their contribution to the management of the crisis. In addition to their practical importance, these initiatives - and their social recognition - are essential to strengthen the social fabric and to prevent a sense of resignation or alienation among the population.

8. Show that vulnerability is shared

The feeling of all being in the same boat is an extremely strong source of energy and flexibility in times of crisis, but it is also a fragile resource. Every effort should be made to prevent it from dissipating prematurely. The pitfall is that some sections of the population may develop a sense of invulnerability or, worse, be perceived as benefiting from the crisis. To combat this, it can be stressed that vulnerability is shared by all; everyone has at least a loved one who can be seriously affected. But the challenge goes far beyond a simple communication effort. It is abo   ve all a matter of following a very clear ethical line in any public action and avoiding undue privileges being granted when calling for sacrifice. It is also critical to show firmness towards any attempt to exploit the crisis for individual gain.

Finally, it is a matter of being sensitive and respectful towards communities of interdependence and effective solidarity formed on the ground, including when they transcend administrative or political borders.

9. Preserving information and communication channels

In times of crisis, media continuity and open communication channels are essential assets. A narrowing of the spaces dedicated to the circulation of information would likely result in a significant increase in the volatility of social behaviour and in the proliferation of situations of personal distress. It is therefore vital to keep public media functional whatever happens and not to take any measures that hinder social interaction beyond the need to guard physical distance. As a primary source of information, the role of public authorities can be guided by three principles: sharing available information, communicating about the limits of current knowledge, and admitting that citizens are better equipped to live with difficult but shared truths than with isolating confusion.

10. Allow for the continuity of social ties

In order to preserve the population's capacity for solidarity and resilience, it is important to avoid, as much as possible, situations of social isolation that may arise from confinement. To clarify the objective the call for physical distance, it may be accompanied by a call to remain in contact, using virtual communication. It is important to avoid a feeling of passivity settling in, not to hinder initiatives of goodwill when they are compatible with the objectives of protection, and to help everyone to differentiate between staying at home and withdrawing, retreating, or feeling helpless.

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Show that vulnerability is shared

The momentum of solidarity can be fragile when crisis management creates or reinforces inequalities.

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Confusion and lack of information are more difficult to manage than shared truths, even dramatic ones.

Allow for the continuity of social ties

Preservation of social ties is a critical resilience factor in times of significant stress.

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