

Perception of risk and optimism barriers in behavior during coronavirus

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Until a vaccine and/or effective cure for COVID-19 becomes available, battling the current pandemic strongly relies on how well people follow behavioral advice, such as adhering to local restrictions, social distancing rules, and engaging in effective personal hygiene. However, overcoming the relationship between risk perceptions and comparative optimism during the pandemic is a major hurdle for engaging the public in behavioral advice.

In a paper published in the journal *Health Expectations*, Health Psychologists and Sociologists from King's College London investigated comparative optimism for infection and recovery from COVID-19, and the implications this may have had on following lockdown advice. The study found that during the first lockdown period, most respondents believed that compared to others, they were unlikely to be at risk of COVID-19.

Dr. Koula Asimakopoulou, Reader in Health Psychology at King's College London explains: "Comparative optimism is a well-established concept in health risk research, where people

believe [negative events](#) are more likely to happen to others than themselves. Most people of all genders and ages show comparative optimism for a wide variety of risks, including many health hazards. For example, most people believe that they are less likely than others to be involved in a car accident."

Researchers believe that comparative optimism may have brought out the anecdotally observed, lack of compliance with lockdown guidelines in the UK. Despite public agreement for [safety measures](#), 25% of the inhabitants of some areas admitted breaking lockdown rules. It is thought that people who perceive COVID-19 is less likely to happen to them than others may also believe strict adherence to lockdown restrictions is unnecessary in their case.

Using an online snowball sampling method through social media and anonymous UK surveys, researchers collected data from 645 UK adults during weeks 5-8 of the UK COVID-19 lockdown. The sample was normally distributed in terms of age, and reflected the UK ethnic and disability profile.

"Controllability of COVID-19 risk has been a prominent factor of the UK Government Public Health advice" said Dr. Sasha Scambler, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at King's College London. "At the start of the lockdown the Government communication focused on the idea that staying home would have direct positive impacts on curbing COVID-19. The slogans Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives had at their heart the idea that this pandemic was controllable by individuals taking personal action. However, greater perceived controllability of an event enhances the likelihood of greater comparative optimism."

In contrast, participants showed comparative pessimism about COVID-19 infections for the more distant future. They felt that compared to others, they were quite likely to contract the virus in the

next year and develop COVID-19 related symptoms, as staying at home would be less possible, plausible or practical.

"These perceptions will have important consequences for people's psychological well-being, and their likelihood of engaging in risk behaviors or responding to further lockdown measures which may soon be upon us," said Dr. Asimakopoulou.

"If people continue to believe COVID-19 'will not happen to me' they may be more relaxed about future lockdown advice. We know that one of the factors that fuel comparative optimism is that people think that if a negative event has not happened to them so far, it is unlikely to happen to them in future.

"The implication for potentially walking into a second lockdown is that where people's experience so far may be that they have not been ill with COVID, they are likely to be even more comparatively optimistic than they were in March. Thinking that COVID has not happened to you so far so it is unlikely to happen to you now, can be even more dangerous than it was earlier in the spring."

More information: Koula Asimakopoulou et al. Comparative optimism about infection and recovery from COVID-19; Implications for adherence with lockdown advice, *Health Expectations* (2020). DOI: [10.1111/hex.13134](https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13134)

Provided by King's College London

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