



Society for HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY

MOTIVATING PATIENTS TO TAKE COVID PRECAUTIONS

Many clinicians have commented that seeing people reject public health advice about how to prevent COVID transmission has been, in a word, infuriating. As primary care clinicians and other medical professionals make personal sacrifices for the health of their community, it is very difficult to see some in the general population refuse to be “inconvenienced” for the sake of public health. The degree to which COVID health behavior change has become a political football has enhanced many clinicians’ sense of powerlessness. There is no “silver bullet” that will make everyone understand the importance of COVID precautions. However, the guidelines below may reduce clinician frustration and enhance the likelihood that conversations with patients are productive.

When a patient is not taking appropriate precautions regarding COVID, take a minute to be mindful about how you proceed to maximize eventual success.

- 🌀 *Ask permission to discuss COVID precautions.* If the patient indicates they don’t want to discuss this issue save your breath in this particular interaction. Research on smoking cessation shows that starting the conversation by asking permission is impactful. Patients who actively agree to discuss the issue have agreed to engage and at least consider the possibilities. Individuals who do not want to engage likely are committed at that point in time to disregarding public health advice. However, just like smoking cessation and discussions about safe sex, it is useful to indicate your interest in discussing precautions across time. A patient who rejects advice today may be more open in the future.
- 🌀 When patients agree to have the conversation about COVID precautions, begin by expressing concern for their wellbeing. In this way, you convey that you are “on their side.” Acknowledge that COVID precautions, like other healthy choices, don’t provide 100% protection. However, they significantly reduce the likelihood of becoming ill. Note that we all **can** “do what is in our power to do” to protect ourselves and those about whom we care.
- 🌀 Ask the patient what they perceive as barriers to masks and social distancing. Help them problem-solve. Offer to brainstorm with them about how to respond to push back from others in their social circle who want a lower level of caution.
- 🌀 It can be helpful to engage the patient’s social network to support improved precautions. Offer to meet with them along with your patient. Just as with other health behaviors, the patient’s social contacts likely have more power over decisions than a medical professional.

Enter into these conversations mindful of your strength and your limitations, and engage in this conversation only if you believe they can be productive. Remember, the degree to which patients follow COVID precautions reflect their health beliefs. As a primary care clinician, you are in a position to provide evidenced based education, influence patients’ beliefs and behaviors, and watch for the opportunities for an individual willing to engage in a productive dialogue.