

# How behavioural science can help us understand human behaviour during a pandemic

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Looking for dried pasta, cooking oil or spices? You're not alone. Credit: Christopher Corneschi/Wikipedia, [CC BY-SA](#)

When the day comes that the COVID-19 pandemic recedes, one of

things that will remain with us is witnessing our fellow humans' irrational and sometimes extreme behavior—and perhaps our own as well. These included [toilet-paper shortages](#), publicly supporting lockdown measures while [privately doing otherwise](#) and large gatherings with [little respect for social distancing](#).

Such irrational behaviors can appear puzzling at first but are rooted in deeper cognitive and evolutionary psychological mechanisms. Many reflect what are called emergency decision and purchasing contexts ([Samson & Voyer, 2014](#)). In a normal context—think pre-COVID-19—individuals make decisions in their own time frames. In a pandemic, however, everyone is suddenly having to make the same type of decisions, within a very short time frame. This creates the perfect storm of factors that influence people and can sway some of them into behaving irrationally.

From a behavioral-science point of view, three main dimensions can explain emergency decision-making and associated irrational behaviors.

## **Social creatures**

Many of the behaviors we are witnessing are driven by social factors. An individual's societal environment—at a macro level, culture; at a micro level, groups of friends, people we share common interests, such as sports—plays an important role in determining his or her behavior. These range from what others around us are doing to cultural norms—the types of shared values that are dominant in some nations. In those that have a more individualist culture—for example, the UK and US—wearing a [face mask](#) can be seen to go against the value of individualism and respect for the expression of individual differences. In collectivist cultures—examples include China, Japan and Korea—behaviors should first and foremost conform to the norm and serve the group and broader interest of society.

Different behaviors, [such as disagreement around whether one should or not wear a mask in public](#), are also influenced by social-identity phenomena. Political opinions are strong drivers of social identity and individuals end up following the recommendations made by the groups with whom they identify.

Behaviors are also guided by perceived social norms. If images of panicked shoppers emptying stores become widespread, they can cause us to perceive such behavior as the norm and push us to do the same. In a normal context, only a small proportion of the population overstocks goods perceived as essential, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a chain reaction of individuals mimicking each other, eventually leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy and generating actual shortages. As stocks are based on past shopping behaviors, supermarkets found themselves overwhelmed. The same can be applied to the wearing of face masks. As we see more people around us wearing—or not—face masks, we start inferring an implicit norm of either wearing or not wearing a mask.

## **Short-term thinking**

The second dimension for explaining irrational behaviors is a cognitive one. We humans tend to display a [short-term bias](#) – decisions are based on assigning greater value to short-term rewards (say, going out to a dinner with friends), as opposed to longer-term ones (e.g., flattening a rising curve of infections).

Such biases also help explain the empty shelves in supermarkets. When the context changes phenomenon's, the very motivation behind buying also changes. In normal situations, individuals generally focus on seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, with one goal prioritized over the other. This is something psychologists refer to as [regulatory focus](#). In stressful contexts, individuals shift their dominant regulatory focus from promotion to prevention. In other words, in a pandemic, individuals

focus primarily on what could go wrong, and try to prevent this from happening.

A change in regulatory focus not only affects the nature of the goods individuals may seek—for example, health-related products, insurance—but also how they will react to messages. Prevention-focused messages such as "do not take the risk of running out of..." [have been shown to be more effective for people with a dominant prevention regulatory focus.](#)

Rising anxiety and stress are also likely to affect buying behaviors. Stress typically reduces cognitive resources available to make a decision, and leaves individuals more susceptible to using heuristics—shortcuts—in decision making. The effect of stress vary from one individual to another, however, with some of us tending to consume more and so comfort ourselves as a way to cope.

The third dimension that can be used to explain irrational behavior is an evolutionary one. Commonly used information-processing strategies can be traced back to our hunter-gatherer ancestors and the constraints they faced. Many of the types of decisions we make in such context thus take the form of fight or flight reactions. In emergency purchasing situation, [our research suggested](#) that individuals are often more likely to rely on heuristics (mental shortcuts) when making instant decisions. [Research also suggests](#) that individuals are more susceptible to paying attention to and spread negative information/unhelpful rumors, as these can provide a survival advantage.

## **When forced behaviors become new habits**

Despite the end of many lockdowns and a falling global mortality rate, the COVID-19 pandemic continues, and some of our new behaviors are becoming habits. For example, French health authorities have urged the

country's residents to [refrain from the traditional "bise"](#) – kisses on both cheeks when meeting a friend or family member.

But once a vaccine is developed, restrictions are lifted and life returns to something approaching "normal," will such newly adopted behaviors remain? For a habit to carry on, it typically needs to "pass" two tests. First, it needs to provide some tangible benefits. Second, the cost of continuing the new habit need to be low. What we have seen with COVID-19 is that people have been forced—rather than freely choosing—to adopt new habits. This means that unless tangible benefits can be derived from those new habits—such as a better work-life balance with working from home—they're unlikely to last. What is likely to stay is any habit that has been perceived as valuable while not requiring costly efforts to be maintained.

For example, some of us have discovered the advantages of working from home—for starters, no commute and the ability to work in pajamas—and may want to stick to it after the pandemic recedes. For others, it's about keeping up a pleasant round of video calls with friends who live far away. Changes in habits are thus likely to be much more individual than society-wide. Everyone will have discovered things they like and/or dislike, and what goes against our social nature is likely to disappear in the long run. Social distancing may be respected while necessary, but maintaining two meters between everyone in a queue won't last any longer than absolutely necessary.

The same goes for "virtual everything." Research overwhelmingly suggests that ["small talk"](#) and [serendipity](#) are an integral beneficial part of the working culture, and those are difficult to reproduce in a virtual context. A video call is a far-away friend is one thing, but for a friend is your neighborhood, you're far more likely to meet face to face, be it at home, in a restaurant or in a public space.

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