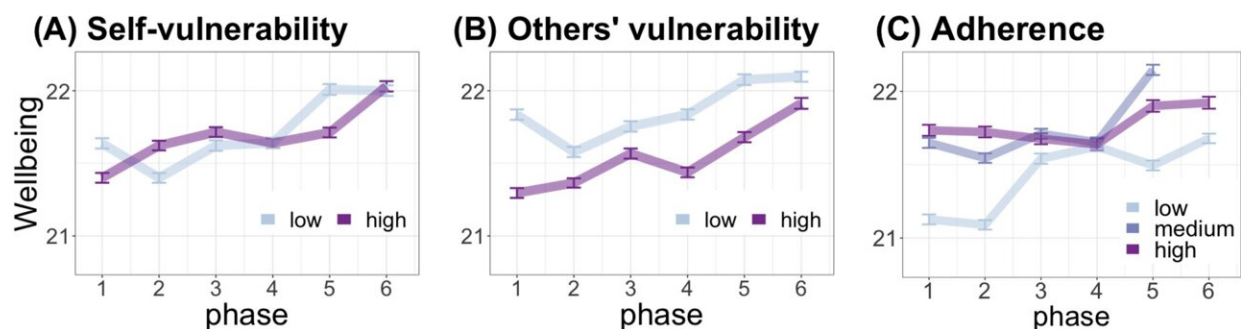


Aligning with others in uncertain situations can improve well-being, study finds

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Pandemic-specific factors and wellbeing over time. The associations between (A) self-vulnerability and well-being, (B) loved ones' vulnerability and well-being, and (C) adherence to physical distancing guidelines and well-being. Dots show the group mean and bars show the standard error of the mean. Credit: *BMC Public Health* (2022). DOI: 10.1186/s12889-022-13130-y

Actions thought to be isolating and potentially detrimental for mental health, such as social distancing, can have a positive impact on well-being for many people when done together as part of a community, according to a global study led by Nottingham Trent University.

The research examined data from fortnightly surveys which questioned more than 6,500 people across 115 countries in the first three months of the pandemic.

Participants reported their well-being, perceptions of how vulnerable they were to COVID-19 and how much they, and others in their [social circle](#) and country, were adhering to the distancing measures. The study also identified certain demographic risk factors for well-being, such as being a woman, being a young adult or living alone.

Social alignment was marked by people behaving more similarly to others around them, sharing experiences and responsibility.

In contrast to widespread views that physical distancing measures negatively affected well-being, results showed that when others around us also comply, following the [social distancing](#) guidelines was linked to better overall well-being, even for people in high-risk groups. Data also revealed that, over time, following the guidelines exactly as given—not doing more or less than required—was best for well-being.

Analysis indicated that it was the social alignment, and not protection from the disease, that was the [driving force](#) behind the increased well-being.

Dr. Bahar Tuncgenc, senior lecturer in Psychology at NTU's School of Social Sciences and research lead, said: "When the pandemic first hit, many people were unsure about what the right thing to do was. Distancing ourselves from loved ones felt unnatural and very hard to do. Yet, even such challenging actions can have a positive impact if they help us behave more similarly to others around us. In a global sample, we tested whether this idea held true within the first year of the pandemic.

"Among our findings we saw that reduced stress was associated with relinquishing individual responsibility about decisions in threatening and uncertain situations. Hence, following the guidelines may have boosted well-being by reducing the burden of individual responsibility during the pandemic.

"Importantly, our findings do not invalidate concerns over COVID-19 measures potentially increasing the likelihood of specific mental illnesses, such as anxiety or depressive disorders. Although [mental health](#) and well-being are closely related, people with a [mental illness](#) can have good well-being, and people without a mental illness can have poor well-being.

"Our results provide an important counterpart to the idea that pandemic containment measures such as physical distancing were bad for well-being. Despite the overall burden of the pandemic, social alignment with others can still contribute to positive well-being."

Dr. Marwa El Zein, co-author from the Crowd Cognition Group of University College London, added: "There are lessons here for other global challenges requiring change in our everyday behaviors—it's not how unusual the behaviors are that matters, but rather how much social alignment and cohesion exists. Social alignment can help us share experiences and decrease the burden of individual responsibility, which is especially helpful during threatening and uncertain situations such as the pandemic. These findings suggest that creating a cohesive community can foster well-being even in the most challenging of times."

"Following [pandemic](#) guidelines is associated with better well-being: Findings from a cross-national sample" has been published by *BMC Public Health*.

More information: Bahar Tunçgenç et al, Social alignment matters: Following pandemic guidelines is associated with better wellbeing, *BMC Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-022-13130-y](#)

Provided by Nottingham Trent University

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