Developing the skills of compliance

Compliance in interpersonal interaction

1. Compliance is often seen as being primarily rooted in motivation. Therefore, promoting compliance is treated as a matter of influencing attitudes and values so people become favourable to the behaviours one is trying to promote. While this is undoubtedly important, it is not enough for people to want to do something in order to actually do it. Equally, people often do things they do not necessarily want to because of the way social interaction occurs and is organized. Having the necessary skills and resources to turn intentions into actions (often referred to as 'capability' and 'opportunity') is equally important[1].

2. A further consideration of importance is that much of the time, we do not make decisions about compliance on our own. Some behaviours (like physical distancing or avoiding physical contact) necessarily involve the presence of others. Other behaviours (e.g., opening a window to improve ventilation or wearing a mask) are frequently performed in the presence of others. Hence it is important to take into account the *inter*personal context in which compliance (or non-compliance) takes place rather than thinking of these as just individual behaviours governed by individual thoughts and feelings.

3. A critical issue, then, is how our behaviours will be understood by others and how they will react to them. If, for instance, we think an action would be seen as impolite[2] or else disrupt our relationship to others[3] (especially where that relationship is important) we will be less likely to do it.

4. Correspondingly, a critical capability is how to present what one does or does not do in terms that make these inoffensive to others. If, for instance, someone suggests breaching the COVID guidelines (e.g., by inviting someone round to the house) or actively initiates a breach (e.g., by reaching out to hug you), how do you express disagreement or refusal without upsetting or alienating others? To do so requires both cultural[4] and conversational skills[5], and without them, people may well end up breaching the guidelines despite their best intentions.

5. An important element in promoting compliance, then, is to provide people with the strategies they need in order to manage their interactions with others and to observe COVID guidelines while maintaining their social relationships. In the next section of this paper, we examine how this approach has proved critical in addressing other public health issues. In the final section we then provide some practical pointers to how people can respond in the context of COVID-19.

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Refusals, requests, and health behaviours

6. It is widely recognised that many unhealthy behaviours, such as taking drugs, alcohol and over-eating, derive from the difficulty of saying 'no' to others who urge one on. One intervention has been to teach the skills of saying 'no'[6].

7. Similar approaches have been taken in relation to sexual health and activity, where not knowing how to refuse sexual proposals can be a critical factor in leading to unwanted acts[7] and where teaching communicational strategies of refusal has been an effective intervention[8]. However, some of this work misunderstands the basic interactional hurdle to saying no (or disagreeing, or other 'negative' actions) that is fundamental to social interaction in general[9].

8. As well as teaching the skills of refusing unhealthy proposals, it is equally important to develop the skill of requesting healthy practices from others. This has been particularly important in the context of AIDS and, more specifically, in relation to asking partners to wear condoms. The ability to make requests depends upon a number of factors, including power relationships between partners[10] and their negotiation skills[11].

9. Flowing from this work, a number of intervention programs were developed that provided conversational strategies if partners reacted badly to the suggestion that they use a condom[12]. More generally, a number of intervention programs focus on teaching communicational strategies that frame safe practices in terms that make them acceptable to the partner[13], and indeed are done out of concern for the partner:

> *"They say, 'What — a condom? Are you trying to say that I've cheated on you?'*
> *You say, 'I trust you. I use condoms because I care about you, and me, and our future together.'"* [14]

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[13] https://www.teenhealthcare.org/blog/you-asked-it-the-condom-conversation/

[14] https://www.ippf.org/blogs/condom-negotiation

Refusals, requests, and COVID compliance

10. In the context of COVID there are multiple situations in which another person breaks – or looks like they are about to break – the COVID-19 guidelines. This could be by acts of commission (reaching out to hug you, suggesting you come inside their house when it is not allowed) or it could be through acts of omission (not using hand sanitiser after touching surfaces, not wearing a mask, sitting down too close to you). These events often happen suddenly and, unless people have thought about them in advance – and planned how to react – they may either let them pass (and hence break the guidelines themselves) or else react in ways that cause conflict and distress (and hence undermine future negotiation).

11. There are a number of general principles about how to respond in such situations which derive from a broad literature about how people manage interaction[15]. These can be reinforced by considering and planning how to apply them in a number of concrete and common scenarios.

Principles

12. The most general overall principle is that one should avoid challenging people and getting them to admit that what they have suggested or done is wrong (which is likely to produce resistance and conflict, and so disrupt social relationships). It is preferable to provide a space in which people can themselves fix their behaviour[16]. This will avoid or reduce friction.

13. Always start from the assumption that the other is a person of goodwill who is breaching the rules either because they are unclear or else because they lack the resources to comply (e.g., that they lack a supply of hand sanitizer or face coverings, in which an offer – "do you need a mask?" is a useful strategy). If you start from the assumption that they are a person of ill-will and that they are deliberately ignoring the rules this runs the danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

14. Always plan in advance and be prepared. Think through what might become awkward situations (e.g., your host comes to hug you) and how you will respond – including the precise actions and words you will use.

15. In order to plan, consider the other person (or people) and what your goals are (besides keeping to the rules). If the person is a stranger, you may want simply to avoid conflict. If they are a friend or family member, you may also want to ensure they do not feel bad and to maintain a close relationship with them.

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16. As we have noted above, the precise way these principles are implemented will depend upon the situation you are in and the people you are talking to. While the principles may be of general application, the exact examples and wording will be different for different social groups.

<u>Scenarios</u>

17. *You meet an old friend who, on seeing you, comes to embrace you or else stretches their hand to shake yours*: Be prepared. Stand back and keep your hands in your pockets. Acknowledge the legitimacy of their action but its impossibility ("I so want to hug you! But I guess we have to wait until it's safe"). Provide alternative actions (e.g., as offers: "I'm giving you a virtual hug", or "I'll step back and give you space"). Provide an account for your refusal which removes blame from the other person ("I'm being especially careful since my mum is a bit frail").

18. *You are with other people who are getting too close to you*: Often a subtle reminder is sufficient, for instance, pause and/or step back with an expectant look on your face as though you are waiting for them to remember something. This will cue them to inspect what they just did and create an opportunity for them to fix it. Another approach is to acknowledge the difficulty of keeping to the rules - either because they are confusing ("it gets so complicated knowing how far apart you are meant to be in different places, but I think we are meant to be further apart than this") or else because it is socially disruptive ("it feels so odd to stay apart, but I guess we have to"). Always seek to frame things as being done out of care and concern for the other ("I'm just going to move back a little – the last thing I would want to do is to infect the people I like!").

19. *You are sitting inside and there is no ventilation, so you want to open the windows to get some fresh air:* This is especially difficult when you are in somebody else's house. A first approach is to frame a request in terms of everybody's interests ("do we need some more air?", perhaps adding "I've heard that getting fresh air is the best way of keeping safe"). The use of irony and humour is also a powerful way of avoiding a request sounding like an accusation ("your house is stuffy"). For instance: "I must have been born in a barn, I really feel fresh air is important nowadays".

20. *Someone tells you it is a big birthday and invites you round for cake*: Refusing direct requests like this, especially from people you are close to, is particularly difficult. It is crucial to respond with empathy and concern ("I would really *love* to come round and give you a big hug!") and to acknowledge the human reasonableness of the request. In such cases, the other person probably knows this is beyond the rules even if they stress why it is not a serious breach ("I haven't seen anyone for weeks so I'm sure I'm safe") so it may not be effective for you to say "but I guess it is against the rules for now". Hence it becomes more important to provide a positive reason for refusal ("I really wouldn't want to infect you – that would be the worst birthday present ever") and also provide alternatives ("let's have a zoom drinking session"; "let's have a special celebration when it's allowed").

Conclusion

21. Helping people to deal with situations where others draw them into violating the COVID guidelines is an important part of improving overall compliance. It is not enough to exhort people to 'just say no' (as the drug and alcohol researchers have found). It is important to help them in saying no without causing offence, creating conflict or else disrupting important social relations. That is one of the core capabilities necessary for compliance.

22. While it is impractical for the whole population to undertake intensive training, simply raising the issue will be important. Getting people to think about the issue, to imagine the tricky situations we all have been in, and to plan a response would be of intrinsic value. Providing simple principles and illustrating them through familiar scenarios (as outlined above) would be of further value.

23. Accordingly, a communication campaign which illustrates some of these scenarios and which uses them to draw out the general principles which people can then apply themselves to different situations would be a valuable addition to the overall COVID messaging.

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