

# **Baylor study: What motivates people to prevent COVID-19?**

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WACO—As the United States continues efforts to vaccinate millions of citizens against COVID-19, marketing researchers from Baylor University have discovered a messaging model that motivates people to take preventive actions to battle the virus.

Researchers James Roberts and Meredith David teamed up for their latest study, “The Pandemic within a Pandemic: Testing a Sequential Mediation Model to Better Understand Racial/Ethnic Disparities in COVID-19 Preventive Behavior,” published in the journal *Healthcare*.

## **Fear + information receptivity = prevention**

The professors found fear—specifically the fear of COVID-19—has been the driving factor that motivates people to take preventive measures. Simply put, the message equation is: Fear of COVID-19 plus information receptivity equals preventive behaviors.

“Fear of COVID-19 is essential to get people to perform preventive behaviors like mask wearing, social distancing, hand-washing and vaccination,” Roberts said. “If an individual or groups of individuals are not fearful of contracting or getting sick from COVID-19, they are less likely to perform preventive health behaviors. This is why young people are less likely to perform such behaviors.”

This “Sequential Mediation Model” takes the place of the long-used “Health Belief Model,” which the researchers said lacks the ability to explain why

people do, or do not, perform certain preventive health behaviors.

The researchers surveyed 483 African American, white and Hispanic adults in the United States. They investigated the role of fear of COVID-19, information receptivity (willingness to search for COVID-19 related information), perceived knowledge and self-efficacy (the belief that we can perform the required preventive behaviors) to explain disparities in preventive behavior across the three major U.S. ethnic groups.

## **The study also found:**

- African Americans reported higher preventive behaviors and self-efficacy than whites.
- Socio-economic status may be more important than race in understanding disparities in preventive health behaviors across the three ethnic groups studied.
- Anglos were found to be more fearful of COVID-19 than African Americans and Hispanics, the latter of which were least afraid of the disease. This led to lower information receptivity (searching for COVID-related information) on the part of Hispanics.
- Hispanic respondents were less receptive and less likely to search for COVID-related information. In contrast, Anglos searched for more information than Hispanics and African Americans.

The study showed that African Americans were significantly more likely than Hispanics to have friends practicing safe behaviors to avoid getting COVID-19. African Americans were also more likely than whites to report they have seen or heard “a lot of reminders” on how to avoid getting COVID-19.

“This higher level of exposure to COVID-19 messages helped explain why African Americans reported high levels of preventive behaviors and feel confident that they can perform such behaviors,” Roberts said.

“Additionally, much media coverage has been devoted to the racial disparities in COVID-19 health outcomes. This could have sensitized African Americans to the importance of wearing masks, social distancing and washing their hands.”

## **Fear is a powerful motivator**

Roberts and David said the impact of race on COVID-19 preventive behaviors is complex and requires continuing study.

Before people jump to conclusions and bash the use of fear as a marketing technique, Roberts said, they should think about what motivates them and others to engage in preventive behaviors such as exercise, eating a healthy diet and getting breast or prostate exams.

Marketers also have capitalized on things like the fear of having bad breath or the fear of missing out, he said.

“So many products are sold on fear appeal,” Roberts said. “You have to get the right balance. The message can’t be so weak that people don’t move, and the message can’t be so dire that people just shut down. There’s a sweet spot.”

Roberts and David said they hope their study sparks an improved understanding of what drives individual health-seeking behavior.

“We feel that this new model will revolutionize how governments and health organizations can encourage people to perform all types of health-related behaviors,” Roberts said. “Fear of COVID-19 plus information receptivity and self-efficacy is the best way that COVID-19 preventive behaviors can be encouraged.”