

A  
**BRIEF**  
GUIDE TO  
**BEHAVIOUR**  
C H A N G E



IN PANDEMIC TIMES  
(AND OTHER CHALLENGES TO OUR WORLD)

# A BRIEF GUIDE TO BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

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## WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO BEHAVIOUR?

We don't fully understand how human behaviour is directed. We might assume that if a human has an intention, or sets a goal, then this leads directly to behaviour. Indeed, if we were inventing a system, perhaps to control a robot, this would be a good starting point.



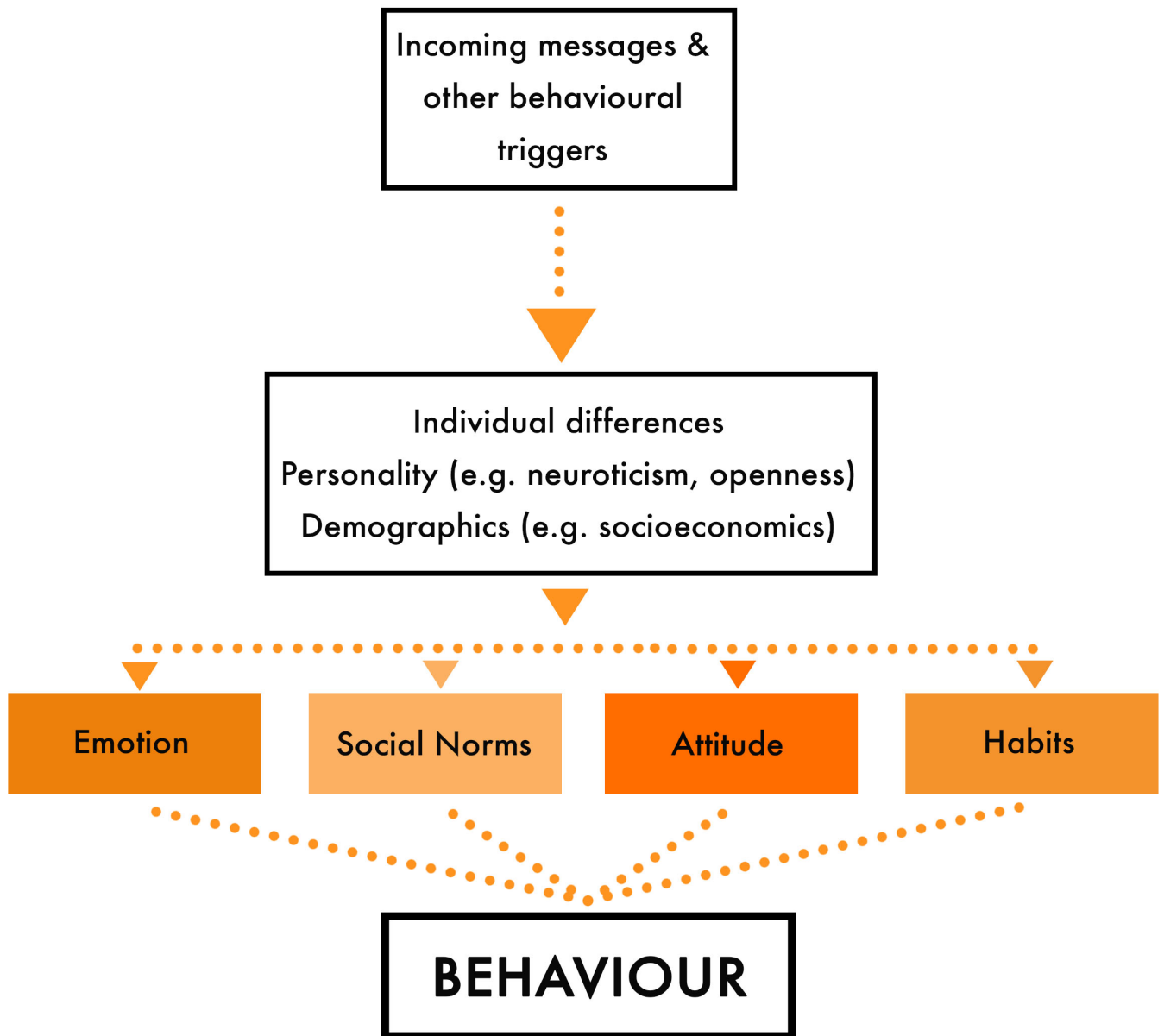
But we often do things contrary to our intentions – much to the chagrin of those around us, and sometimes to our own shame. This is called the **intention-action gap** and is often discussed in relation to the world's wicked problems, such as with climate change (why don't we behave in a sustainable way?).

Part of the answer is that we have evolved a complex set of mechanisms that contribute to behaviour.



# WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO BEHAVIOUR?

One model of behaviour looks like this:



*Adapted from: Triandis (1977) Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour*

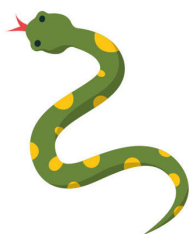


## WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO BEHAVIOUR?

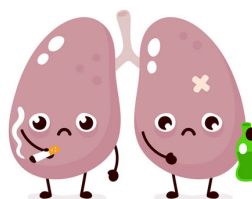
Essentially, there are multiple inputs competing for control. This reflects a variety of historically relevant evolutionary pressures, as different types of information are necessary to ensure survival and procreation in a complex and changing landscape. Let's look at these in turn:

### EMOTION

Before language we needed a mechanism to trigger behaviour in certain life threatening or life promoting situations. Emotions are primarily triggered by the immediate presence of a relevant stimulus: When we see a snake we are immediately afraid, and likely to 'freeze' (emotional trigger and consequent behavioural response). The emotion system works best in this kind of immediate and sensorially rich situation. It doesn't work very well when the stimulus (the thing to be feared) is distant (in time, space, or psychologically ie. is abstract not concrete). For example, often people struggle to stop smoking because the consequences of this action are only felt in the distant future.



Close & Concrete Threat

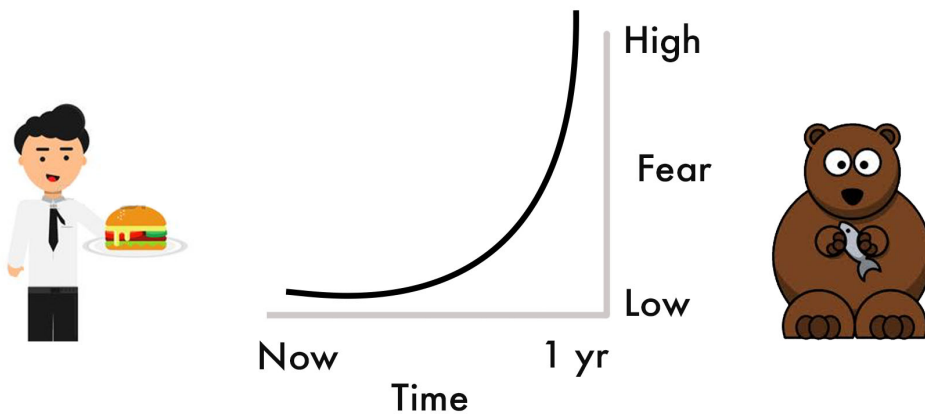


Distant & Abstract Threat



# EMOTION

Imagine someone offered you a lot of money to feed a sandwich to a bear in a year's time.



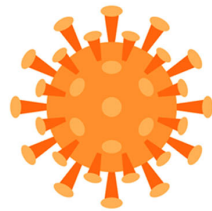
The figure shows a classic discounting function characterising emotional intensity over time (or other psychological distance). With a year to go, fear is low. Indeed, even half-way to feeding time, fear is only marginally higher. However, as the final few days approach, emotional intensity ramps up. If you had the chance to change your mind (and change your proposed behaviour) then it's only when danger is imminent and fear intense that you would do so.

Now imagine someone implored you to stay indoors, and if you did go out, to stay 2m from others. Otherwise, you might catch, and pass on, a deadly virus. This is in some ways similar to feeding a bear in a year. You can't see the danger, it doesn't feel close, it doesn't elicit strong emotions. Behaviour isn't motivated (the word emotion is derived from the verb 'to move').



## EMOTION

What you need is to smell the fetid breath of the hungry bear. Or, in Covid terms, to feel the deadliness of contagion. People differ in their ability to imagine; in its intensity. People also feel differently about whether risks are likely to impact them. So whilst imaginative pessimists may feel the terror and comply without much prompting, unimaginative optimists may discount a distant and abstract threat. This works in a similar way for positive emotions and incentives. The more **concrete**, **immediate** and **close** they are, the more likely they will motivate behaviour.



## SOCIAL NORMS

We are to some degree herd animals and we copy the behaviour of others. This is seen in our imitation of specific role-models (see next) but also in the way we find comfort in conforming to the behaviours of our in-group (people like us). In other words, we seek out information about what others around us are doing and we copy it. Often this is an unconscious process – we are not aware we do it. So, when the media depicts people flocking to beaches around the country we have a greater tendency to do the same.





## SOCIAL NORMS

Critically, even if the media says “don’t go to the beach because there are lots of people there” we extract the message “there are lots of people at the beach” as the normative signal and so are **more likely to go**. It is the underlying behavioural trend that is copied, not necessarily the intended purpose of the original message.



We tend to model behaviours of our in-group and discount those of out-groups (see ideology below). When we see people in foreign countries wearing face coverings, but few in our own town, we might discount wearing

face coverings irrespective of Government advice.

Importantly, group perspective can change and so a leader should be careful about the language they use and how they themselves are defining who is being included as part of their group.



Norms, like emotions, work powerfully when they relate closely to our social community. In classic ‘energy-saving’ studies, when a homeowner was given normative information about their energy use compared to their neighbours, it was more likely to influence their behaviour (reducing energy use), relative to when the normative information was about the broader region or country. If the contagion or death-rates of the virus could be provided in real-time to the population, then it is more likely they will comply with Government appeals for lockdown when a local outbreak occurs (and see emotions above). Even better would be normative information on compliance rate in a local community.





## ATTITUDE & IDEOLOGY

We are more likely to accept and comply with a message given by someone who shares our ideology. Likewise, we'll discount messages given by people we disagree with. We also discount messages from people who themselves fail to comply with the message. On the other hand, we accept message from people who are like us (those we see as being part of our in-group), and also role-models whom we aspire to emulate. In fact, we'll change our ideology for them. Finally, we are more likely to maintain behaviours when we have made a commitment to doing so (particularly a public declaration).



Ideally then, to present a unified ideological approach, leaders would seek unanimous agreement on policy. They would ensure that their team act as valuable role-models demonstrating the key behaviours they wish individuals to engage in – those required to reduce 'R.' They would use local champions to sell their message. And they would encourage individuals to make public declarations of commitment to supporting widespread behaviour change. To maximise trust, leaders would also be transparent about the scientific basis, and evidence, which they use to then make policy decisions.



## HABITS

We are very much creatures of habit. The initial discomfort and then adaptation to Lockdown has shown us that. This also represents an opportunity, as our 'old' lives have been significantly disrupted and so pre-existing routines are no longer being triggered. Many people have suggested how the world could be reimagined for a brighter future. However, the risk is that as we are 'eased' we will return to our original habits. This means we need guidance as to how to behave in the future, and such guidance must be backed by continued regulation or incentive. And plenty of messaging. What population behaviours could we reduce permanently over the next year or so? What replacement behaviours can we incentivise, model, and build into a new civic society?



# BRINGING

## IT ALL

## T O G E T H E R . . .



## A COHERENT APPROACH

Bringing all this together, how do we proceed? For example, with a message to keep socially distant during the easing of lockdown, one might:

### EMOTION

Make emotions more intense in a way that will drive key safety behaviours by making them closer in psychological terms (washing hands, wearing face coverings, replacing handshakes with alternatives).

### SOCIAL NORMS

Set norms by showing appropriate behaviours. Think about the behavioural trends that social media images and narratives portray.

### ATTITUDES

Model the behaviours you want others to do; unite factions; find common language and ground; ask your target audience to make commitments to their society and local communities.

### HABITS

Show and support new behavioural routines and habits. Model them, celebrate them, broadcast them. Be proactive in promoting them.

## IMPLEMENTATION FACTORS...



## IMPLEMENTATION FACTORS

One key factor for implementation is that there are individual and group differences in responses to the above. Whilst these are not fully understood, there are some clear rules of thumb. We tend to 'group' and so the above strategies can be tailored to different segments. This might be around the media channel to deliver messages (TikTok for teenagers, print media for older readers), as well as the person delivering the message (role models for specific groups). Given some groups are disproportionately affected by Covid-19 according to age, ethnicity and biological sex, it is important to carefully consider who to prioritise, and how to target messages most appropriately.

## CONCLUSION

Reports suggest that the UK and US have shown the worst response to Covid-19 across Western cultures. It may not be a coincidence that these two countries have sacrificed civic duty and a sense of community for personal freedoms and the primacy of the individual. Such a path comes at the cost to the well-being of the greater community. White gun-touting vigilantes standing on the corners of US cities is not a sign of a mature society.

PEOPLE  
SOMETIMES  
BEHAVE IN WAYS  
THAT  
WE WOULD DESCRIBE  
AS BEING  
IRRATIONAL...



# CONCLUSION

...however, their behaviour is likely driven by **understandable** and **systematic** factors like the ones outlined here. Whilst we cannot predict or influence every individual in the way we may wish to, we can be confident that using the tools described herein can change the behaviour of a proportion of the population, and in so doing move that population in the direction we need to for the future resilience of our society.

Understanding this gives us the leverage to change the behaviour of the population, in a way that builds **civic responsibility, greater trust in Government** and protects the **health and wellbeing** of us all.



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