

Behavioral Science in Public Health

Balasaheb M Biradar

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Abstract

Behavioral science is the discipline dealing with the subject of human actions of sociology, social and cultural anthropology, psychology, and behavioral aspects such as biology, economics, political science, geography, law, and psychiatry.

Behavioral Science provides timely intuition to double down strategies to revive the now dampened demand for essential public health services within the society. The coronavirus is bringing down the 'perceived risk' posed by other health issues than the Covid-19. All the communications involving public health activities in current times must adopt a framing which actively challenges behavioral barriers.

People are nowadays negotiating between the harms of exposure to the pandemic and the useful benefits of other health services. This calculus can go very wrong and ties in squarely with the behavioral barriers of 'availability bias', 'loss aversion', and 'hyperbolic discounting'.

The World Health Organization in their briefing has indicated that COVID-19 may become endemic, like HIV, and never go away without proper preventive, protective measures and eradicating programmes.

As we see behavioral science has brought many changes in the life of peoples and modifying their behavior in preventing the Virus, affecting people and staying safe: So behavioral Science is the back bone of the general public health system.

Keywords: Behavioral science; Balasaheb M Biradar; Availability bias; Loss aversion, Hyperbolic discounting.

Introduction

Behavioral science is the discipline dealing with the subject of human actions of sociology, social and cultural anthropology, psychology, and behavioral aspects such as biology, economics, political science, geography, law, and psychiatry.¹

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demand for essential public health services within the society. The coronavirus is bringing down the 'perceived risk' posed by other health issues than the Covid-19. All the communications involving public health activities in current times must adopt a framing which actively challenges behavioral barriers.²

COVID-19 has caused a definite haul in our economic growth story and fallout on indicators for human development is near certain. Hospitals and frontline health workers so called Covid-19 warriors are now exclusively focused to tackle the pandemic, despite its low fatality rates. Given its countermeasures, we are seeing a huge dip in demand for other essential health services.²

There is a growing need to bring every one's attention back to other health issues here are some layout how behavioral science will be the crucial

Author Affiliation: Associate Professor, Department of Medical Surgical Nursing, Gouritai Tilak College of Nursing, Solapur 411030 Maharashtra, India.

Corresponding Author: Balasaheb M Biradar, Associate Professor, Department of Medical Surgical Nursing, Gouritai Tilak College of Nursing, Solapur 411030 Maharashtra, India.

E-mail: bmbiradar29@gmail.com

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spanner in our toolbox, as we retune back our health system.²

The availability bias, it is the human tendency to think that examples of things that come readily to mind are more representative than is actually the cases.³

Loss aversion's thought that the pain of losing is psychologically about twice as powerful because the pleasure of gaining.⁴

Hyperbolic discounting referred to the tendency of public to choose a smaller sooner reward over a larger later reward as the delay occurs sooner rather than later in time⁵ for example the government-imposed measures of a nation wide lockdown until May 17. Strict measures like these compound an individual's tendency to start evaluating long term losses, to possibly fleeting, short term gains. This is known as hyperbolic discounting.⁶

In the context of several decades of India's hard-fought battles with public health issues like Polio, TB, Leprosy and other such diseases, this has many consequences. WHO reports that millions of children are at risk due to hampered immunization services against vaccine-preventable diseases, in the cases of diseases like TB, we are already seeing a spike in deaths across major cities. This disruption has also badly affected the provision of medical procedures and services like health counseling, access to immunization, contraceptives, and iron supplements. These are crucial in maintaining childhood and maternal well being along with addressing issues like malnutrition.²

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This implies that an individual's understood ability to estimate health risk is reduced, leading to irrational decision making. As per reports, close to 1 Lakh children have already missed their BCG vaccine which protects children from TB and another 2 Lakh may have missed their pentavalent vaccine, which prevents children from several deadly diseases. In aspects of family planning and safe sex, as per UN figures, a lack of access to family planning services including temporary and permanent contraceptives may see upwards of 7 million unwanted pregnancies worldwide.²

As lock downs lifting the activities and services slowly resuming, the health system is not only grappling with issues of infrastructure but also

new health beliefs and fears. So how can Behavior Science help, Here are some proposals multi-pronged and systematic approach to be adopted as we kick-start the machinery.

Firstly, all communications around public health activities in current times must adopt a framing which actively challenges behavioral barriers. For example, in all advertisements and awareness for health messages, say on TB, people should be asked to wear 'face coverings'. This would make the use of masks salient and also promote protective behaviors around COVID-19. To bolster such an approach further, using celebrities to communicate messages can play an important role in driving effective behavior change campaigns. In India, we saw this with the huge success of the Pulse Polio Programme Campaign that brought a drastic change in the mortality of Children's against Polio.

Secondly, there needs to be a dedicated push to the use of simple yet innovative non communication tools or interventions. These can include reminders, commitment devices or behaviorally informed job-aids. A simple yet effective use case is that of normal reminders which help emphasize the long-term benefits of availing health services, even during current times. These can be delivered through simple Interactive Voice Response System calls and messages or specialized goal tracking calendars. The applications range from immunizations, antenatal care visits, iron supplementation, Screening of HIV or even other check ups and tests.

Thirdly and finally, systematic incorporation of behavioral insights into public health programmes. Making use of both, communication and non-communication interventions can lead to a robust, 360 degree approach, in targeting behavioral barriers and this has also been suggested by the World Health Organization, as a part of the strategic planning for pandemic response. The need of the hour is for rapid empirics based approach to check effectiveness and back such deciding. Perhaps the deployment of a dedicated 'nudge unit' or 'behavioral insights unit(s)' housed within the center's or every state's healthcare department.

The World Health Organization in their briefing has indicated that COVID-19 may become endemic, like HIV, and never go away without proper preventive, protective measures and eradicating programmes. As we learn to live our lives with such a contagious virus, following preventive measures like social distancing, wearing a mask, and regular hand washing would become essential.

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changes in the life of peoples and modifying their behavior in preventing the Virus, affecting people and staying safe: So behavioral Science is the back bone of the general public health system.

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