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## **Optimising physical distancing to reduce the spread of Covid-19: Behavioural science and disease prevention guidance for public health. Taking a Behavioural Science approach**

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## GUIDANCE

# Optimising physical distancing to reduce the spread of Covid-19: Behavioural science and disease prevention guidance for public health

## TAKING A BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE APPROACH

This guidance offers recommendations for interventions that can be used to encourage and enable physical distancing. The target behaviour for this guidance document is physical distancing, defined as staying 1–2 metres (depending on national guidance) apart from people in the same location. We are using the term ‘physical distancing’ as opposed to ‘social distancing’, in line with the World Health Organization and our earlier [guidance](#)<sup>1</sup>.

Physical distancing is important when viruses are airborne, such as the virus that causes Covid-19. Remaining at a physical distance from others reduces the risk of aerosols and droplets entering the eyes, nose or mouth and therefore reduces the risk of spreading infection<sup>2</sup>, particularly with physical distancing of 1 metre or more<sup>3</sup>. Many governments and health agencies have recommended people adhere to a physical distance of between 1 metre<sup>4</sup> to 2 metres<sup>5</sup> from people who are not in their household or ‘bubble’. In general, people typically stand a little less than 1 metre away from familiar people and 1.3 metre away from others<sup>6</sup>. Whilst many people have started to physically distance, standing 2 metres away requires breaking strong habits. Even where regulations do not require physical distancing, people might still be encouraged to distance where possible, in regions where transmission rates are rising or high.

This guidance is based on a systematic review of the evidence for interventions to encourage physical distancing and summarises the approaches that are effective in helping people to maintain physical distance from others<sup>7</sup>. This included six papers, reporting 14 interventions with over 5500 people. There may be other approaches that could be effective but at present there is no evidence for or against them. It is important to note that some of the evidence reports influences on intention to distance physically rather than the action of physical distancing itself.

GUIDANCE

## REMAIN S P A C E D\*

**S – SUPPLY FEEDBACK**

Letting people know that they are too close is likely to support physical distancing. It can be difficult for people to know when they are too close to others, so giving people immediate feedback that they are close is likely to be helpful. This could include training staff to intervene in public spaces or events.

**P – PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT CONSEQUENCES**

Providing information about the consequences of not distancing (i.e. transmitting the virus) has been found to increase distancing behaviour. For some, this fosters beliefs that physical distancing will have a good consequence (i.e. reduce transmission of the virus, reduce opportunities for the virus to mutate, contribute to restrictions being lifted sooner). For others, this is the perception that catching the virus has severe consequences.

**A – ADDRESS NORMS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Believing that physical distancing is a moral and social norm can positively influence adults' intentions to physically distance (although there is no evidence for predicting behaviour). Messages that emphasise social responsibility to prevent virus transmission may, therefore, be effective. This is in keeping with the evidence from other protective behaviours such as wearing face coverings, where people respond well to calls to protect their communities.

**C – CREDIBLE SOURCES**

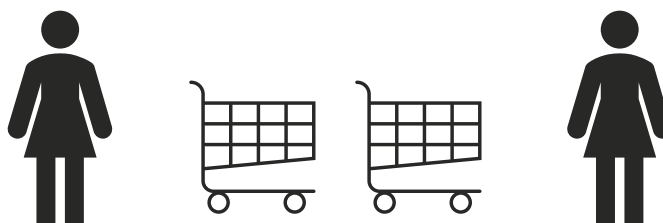
A credible source (a trustworthy person – a leader, or someone with expertise) is useful but only when the message itself is in line with evidence. Written messages from credible sources focusing on the moral duty for physical distancing were effective in increasing intentions to physically distance. However, credible sources giving messages about health consequences of distancing were not effective in increasing intention to physically distance.

**E – ENABLED ENVIRONMENT**

Physical distancing is enabled by the environment including the number of other people, space and distractions. Reducing the number of people in any space and reducing distractions (e.g. other tasks, conversations) when distancing is important. Implementing a directional system, either one way or clearly delineated two-way lanes, is also an effective approach to optimise distancing behaviour.

**D – DEMONSTRATION OF BEHAVIOUR**

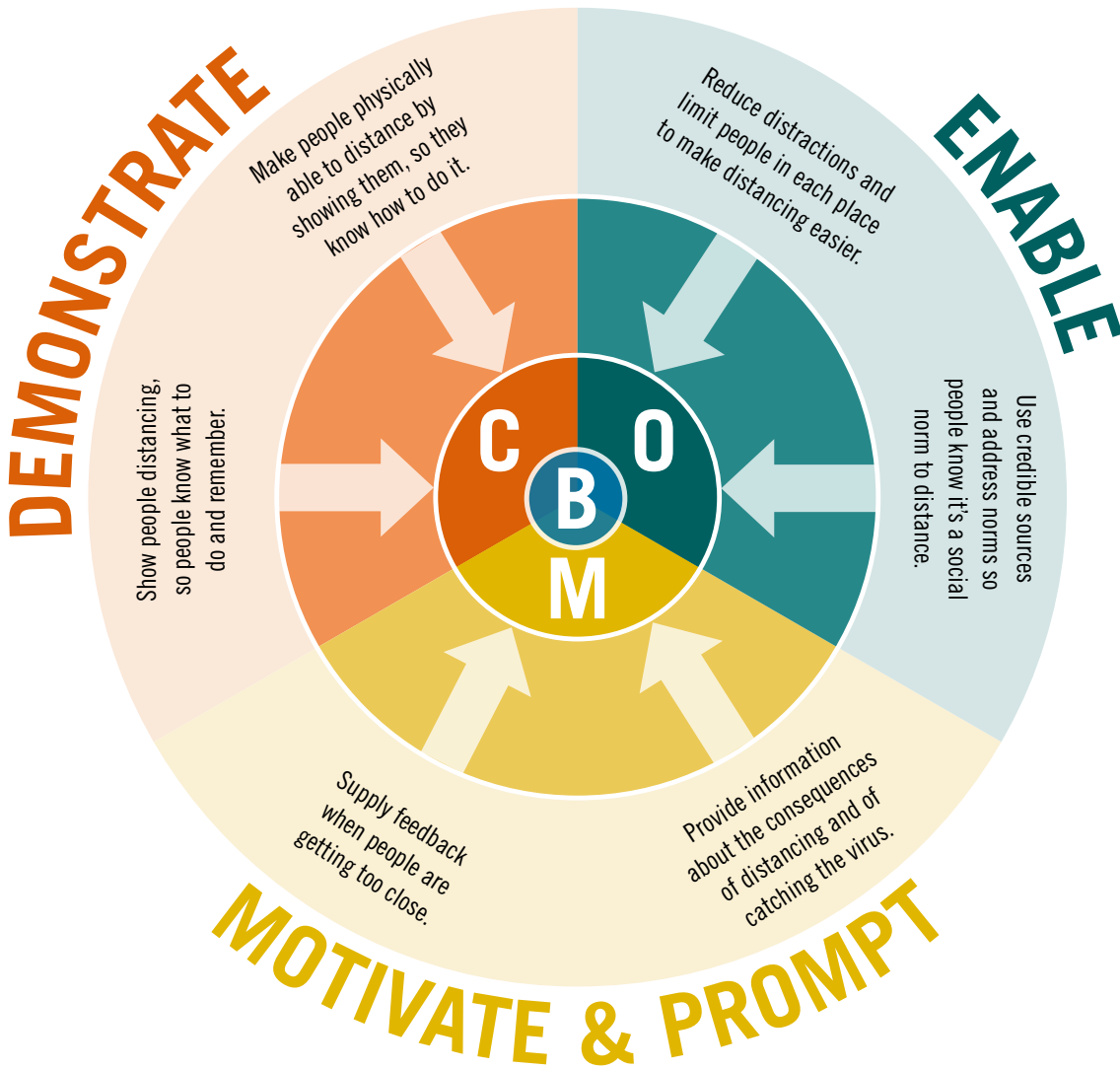
Showing people physical distancing can be done with markings or visual information. This could be in posters with information about the size of a 2 metre distance (for example two shopping trolleys, one highland cow) which can be helpful to increase intentions to distance.



\*Constructed from the review of interventions to promote the performance of physical distancing<sup>7</sup>.

**INFLUENCES ON BEHAVIOUR**

It is important to identify what influences preventive behaviours such as physical distancing and ensure policies, messaging and interventions target all relevant drivers<sup>1</sup>. Behavioural drivers are linked to the Capability to enact (e.g. knowledge/skill); Opportunity to enable, (e.g. societal norms/ physical resources) and Motivation to perform (e.g. desire/intention/ emotion/habit) the Behaviour (COM-B)<sup>8,9</sup>. All should be present for behaviour to occur.



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