COVID-19 pandemic: health promotion responses

INTERACTIVE WEBINAR

22 June 2020, from 18.00 to 19.00 CEST

Speaker: Pr. Stephan Van den Broucke

Global Health & Education webinar series

Organised by UNESCO Chair and WHO Collaborating Center
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Health Promotion Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Stephan Van den Broucke
UC Louvain

Global Health & Education webinar series
UNESCO Chair and WHO Collaborating Centre Global Health & Education
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What can health promotion contribute in terms of management of the pandemic?
QUESTION

What are your key words to describe the contribution of health promotion in managing the pandemic?

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Why health promotion matters to address the COVID-19 challenge

- COVID-19 has a huge health and societal impact
  - Measures to prevent the virus from spreading and to reinforce treatment capacities are unprecedented
  - Lockdown has disruptive societal consequences

- Health promotion is more important than ever
  - Many protective measures involve *behaviour change* by citizens & health workers
  - Perception that the existing health system is failing to protect citizens against the spread of the virus creates a need for people to *regain control* of their health
    - to protect oneself against the disease
    - to deal with its disruptive consequences
  - Health promotion’s contribution to tackle the pandemic can focus at the *downstream, midstream* and *upstream* level
Improving Preventive Behaviour Change Measures

• Health authorities have tried to enhance protective behaviour
  – through providing information, issuing health warnings, and imposing legal restrictions
  – low adherence is condemned as “irresponsible” and “selfish”

• Health behaviour models show that people will only act on health warnings if they
  – believe that they are personally susceptible
  – perceive the consequences as severe;
  – perceive the preventive action as effective to reduce the threat
  – believe they are capable to perform the preventive action

• Wide coverage of the pandemic by the media creates anxiety
  – too much anxiety can elicit cognitive avoidance strategies that minimize the perceived threat
  – social identity needs in interaction with contextual factors can increase and mitigate the actual rejection of evidence (knowledge resistance)
Maintaining preventive behaviour

• Behaviour change ≠ behaviour maintenance
  – Protective behaviour will have to be maintained as there is chance of infection
  – Relying on health warnings, fear appeals and legal restrictions will become increasingly ineffective to maintain preventive behaviour

• Encouraging sustainable behaviour change requires
  – the establishing of social norms
  – modification of the context to facilitate and encourage (« nudge ») protective behaviour
  – envouraging habit formation
    • takes shape when the newly learnt behaviour persists
    • takes place automatically, without the need for conscious reflection
    • robust against change
Empowering Organizations and Communities

• Efforts to implement protective measures will be more successful if the advice from experts is combined with *local community knowledge*
  – community partners can help to improve the understanding of disease control protocols
  – moderate changes can be made that better reflect the community’s sensitivities

• Community engagement can *strengthen the capacity* to deal with the disruptive effects of the pandemic
  – despite the insecurity and stress due to the switch to different modes of operating, many communities show high levels of solidarity and mutual support
  – community resilience and trust provide a strong basis to help organizations and communities cope with the unfamiliar situation, re-organize and regain control

• *Strengthening community action* is a key competence of health promotion
  – builds on the existing strengths and capacities within a community
  – expertise creating healthy settings can be a source of inspiration and support to help schools, universities and workplaces deal with the longer-term disruptive effects
Fake news, understanding complex issues, health knowledge: how to develop the capacity of each individual to take charge of their own health?
QUESTION

Do you think the people have the necessary skills to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic?

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The importance of health literacy

• To (re)gain control of their lives in the pandemic, people must
  – know what individual preventive measures to take
  – know how to deal with the consequences

• With respect to COVID-19, there is (too) much information
  – not all information is useful, some information is biased or wrong
  – too much information can create confusion

• The challenge is not to provide more information, but to help people find the way to accurate and reliable health information
  – provide information in an understandable, transparent and consistent way recognizing that people with low health literacy may need more explanation and different communication formats
  – explain the situation transparently and clarify the objectives repeatedly
  – communicate new evidence and information without being afraid to correct earlier messages and statements if necessary; and
  – avoid blaming, but instead strengthen the well-informed responsibility of the individual while showing solidarity with vulnerable groups
Taking up information is an active cognitive process

- People actively select information sources and information from within these sources
  - selection is influenced by context, emotions and selective attention
  - subject to selection and confirmation bias

- Cognitive schemes are activated to understand and appraise information about the virus and to judge the importance of preventive measures

This can also cause bias
  - **negative** information bias
    (i.e. the tendency to attach more importance to negative than to positive information, resulting in «catastrophic thinking»)
  - **positive** information bias
    (i.e. the tendency to consider oneself as less at risk for negative consequence, causing «unrealistic optimism»)
  - **familiarity** or recency bias
Countering fake news

- Persistent *myths* about COVID-19
  - belief that the virus was made in a laboratory or otherwise engineered
  - belief that cold weather or hand dryers kill the virus
  - belief that young people cannot get infected
  - belief that antibiotics or vaccines against pneumonia protect against the infection

- False beliefs are reinforced by the false consensus that is created when information is shared on social media leading to the *echo chamber* or *illusion of truth* effect

- Can be countered by encouraging people to
  - *cross check* the accuracy and credibility of information
  - check the *source* of the information
    - where does it come from, who is behind the information, what is the intention, why was it shared, when was it published …
  - *verify* the information by consulting a second source
  - think twice before *sharing* information that has not been fact-checked
There will probably be several waves of COVID-19 outbreaks or other pandemics. What are the health promotion recommendations for a sustainable response to the pandemic and for the future?
QUESTION

Will health promotion be widely implemented in managing future pandemics?

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A sustainable reply to the COVID-19 pandemic

- Health promotion can contribute to containing COVID-19 and help people and communities to regain control
  - encourage and facilitate people to adopt and maintain protective behavior
  - strengthen people’s competences to find the way to accurate and reliable health information
  - strengthen communities to take action, building on the existing strengths and capacities within the community
  - draw on the expertise with the settings approach to help schools, universities and workplaces deal with the longer-term disruptive effects of COVID-19
Learning from the crisis

• Recognize the *importance of infectious diseases*
  – Health promotion has traditionally focused on non-communicable diseases and promoting positive health, but neglected to apply health promotion principles and methods to address infectious diseases
  – Requires a stronger focus on intervention research and a better understanding in the processes involved in implementation, rather than on outcomes and causality

• Recognize that human *health is not an isolated issue*
  – Embrace the concept of “One Health”, which recognizes the interconnection between people, animals, plants and their shared environment

• Prepare to *respond swiftly* and effectively to epidemics
  – Learn about the ways in which people make decisions, organizations operate and communities relate in reaction to epidemics and other crises
  – Seek out how social cohesion and trust in public institutions can be strengthened and mobilized to make communities and populations more resilient against crisis

• Accept that *not all events can be predicted* and controlled, and that uncertainty is part of life
COVID-19
A TIME FOR SOLIDARITY
AND RESILIENCE
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