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How the Corona Crisis Reveals the Power of Social Learning

The current crisis is forcing many of us to fall back on learning from others.

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Source: Andrea Piacquadio / Pexels

People are constantly adapting to their environment. As a trivial example, you might start ordering on a regular basis from a specific restaurant after a few very positive experiences with their food. Such changes in behavior are instances of “*learning*” and have been studied by psychologists for more than a century.

However, learning is not restricted to the effects of personal experience. In fact, a considerable part of our behavior seems to be the result of observing *other* people’s behavior or hearing/reading about *their* interactions with the

world. We learn to tie our shoes not (only) through trial and error but because our parents show us how it’s done, we might start avoiding dogs after someone tells us that they were bitten by one, or we might discover a new product after looking at online reviews by other consumers. *Social learning* – learning from others – influences all aspects of everyday life.

Importantly, it can also play a crucial role in crisis situations. Research suggests that *our reliance on social learning even increases when circumstances are highly ambiguous or uncertain*, or when the potential consequences of “learning on your own” might be costly. As we try to deal with the current crisis, this is exactly what is happening: learning via our personal experiences is taking a back seat to learning via observation or verbal information. It is remarkable how many of us have not had direct contact with the *coronavirus*, yet almost all of us have made (sometimes extensive) changes to our behavior based on socially transmitted information from other people.

This highlights one of the ways in which social learning can be hugely adaptive: *Fear can be transmitted socially*, which can lead us to change our behavior and equip us with the possibility to avoid or eliminate the threat. Today, people everywhere can see the consequences suffered by others as a result of the virus. Moreover, we are not only learning from other people that there is something to be feared, but also *how* we should behave in order to reduce the risk to ourselves and others. This takes many shapes and forms, from health experts explaining when and how to wash our hands or keep our distance, to people massively posting pictures on social media to show that they and their roommates are all staying home. Social learning can also create social pressure to actually follow through on those behaviors.

For many of us, the crisis has introduced multiple changes to our environment. These changes bring about novel challenges to which we need to adapt, if only temporarily: Social contact may be heavily reduced, having to stay indoors can lead to a lack of physical activity, working from home might not be ideal for everyone, and so

activities you can do at home or online with friends or family, offering advice for maintaining or improving mental health, and sharing strategies for dealing with possibly difficult situations, such as having to work from home while also taking care of your children.

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It is important to realize that our ability to learn socially also has a dark side, in the sense that unwanted behaviors can likewise be transferred very quickly. For example, seeing others post pictures of empty stores or noticing that the person next to you in the supermarket is buying large quantities resulted in widespread [hoarding](#) behavior. Still other individuals might refuse to follow guidelines because their social environment includes many people who believe the threat is being exaggerated or because they regularly encounter media sources questioning the value of official guidelines.

In sum, the current crisis strikingly illustrates the power of social learning compared to individual, trial-and-error learning, which has less to offer under the current circumstances. Social learning carries certain risks and requires us to rely on and trust others. Nevertheless, when so many of us are faced with the same unprecedented crisis, humans' extensive ability to learn from others proves very valuable indeed.

—**Sarah Kasran**

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[The Learning and Implicit Processes Lab](#) at Ghent University examines when and how people learn and evaluate. In doing so, the lab focuses on the role of implicit processes, or processes that occur spontaneously.

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