My lab group met to chart our response to COVID-19. Here’s what we learned

By Jay J. Van Bavel  |  Mar. 18, 2020, 12:50 PM

The COVID-19 pandemic has inspired a wave of panic and distress as universities close, students are dislocated, careers are disrupted, and professors scramble to cover their teaching and research obligations. The pressure is compounded by more personal concerns—feelings of social isolation, coping with family and friends who are seriously ill or at-risk, and struggling to juggle child care during school closures. I’m a professor in New York City—a COVID-19 hotspot—and I’ve spent much of the past week sorting through how I should respond.

I started by canceling talks and conferences, rescheduling guest speakers, and shifting my teaching to reach 300 students online. I put an end to my lab meeting, which is usually attended by up to 20 students and postdocs, and instead invited my core lab group—one postdoc and four Ph.D. students— to a small meeting to map our way through the impending crisis.

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out what we could reasonably (and ethically) accomplish. Third, I wanted to put our heads together and brainstorm how we might study COVID-19 and help the situation, in our own small way.

Well-being

As group members came into the room that morning, I could see the stress on everyone’s faces. I wasn’t the only one who had suffered from insomnia the night before. There were only five of us, but we were spread out across the room to maintain our distance from one another. One student was unable to make it in person because he was stuck in a 2-hour line to buy food, but he joined us midway through the meeting via Skype. The situation felt surreal.

Instead of diving into research logistics, we started the meeting by making small talk. We swapped stories about sleep deprivation, shared pictures of lines stretching around the block, and commiserated about canceled spring break plans. The first thing I tried to communicate was that everything going forward was optional: Each member of the lab could decide to keep our weekly meetings or cancel them, work from home or come into the lab, collaborate on new projects or simply sit at home and stream movies.

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From there, we turned to issues of health and safety. We talked about disinfecting our workspace, computers, and phones. I mentioned that I had purchased Clorox wipes and cleaning alcohol and would bring it in for people to use. We affirmed the need to sit far apart, avoid handshakes, and

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discussing these issues was helpful in establishing reasonable expectations and norms.

Then the group decided to hold an optional weekly virtual lab scrum on Zoom where people could simply touch base and get support. There was also some interest in turning this scrum into a daily event where people could simply work quietly in a virtual chat and simply chime in whenever they needed help—not unlike most in-person lab environments. We decided to pilot some of these strategies to see what works best.

**Contingency plans**

Several members of the lab were distressed about the state of their research projects, departmental requirements, dissertation timelines, and conference presentations. One student, who is in her first year of graduate school, suddenly faced the prospect of her project grinding to an immediate halt. Another student was worried that two of her invited talks at major conferences would be canceled. Two others had to watch a year of careful pilot work go down the drain, as their exciting new study on the neuroscience of moral disagreements would need to be canceled. They all wanted to work through contingency plans and get some assurances that this situation would not devastate their careers.

I noted that we could spend more time reading, thinking, and learning. Another lab member suggested that we would finally have the time to take an online course or learn about new statistical techniques. These were things that often fell to the wayside during the normal chaos of the academic year. But they are important and intellectually nourishing. We also agreed that this period could offer a chance for many of us to analyze and write up existing data or make some progress on a dissertation. We decided to pause projects that wouldn't be possible—for instance, because they require interacting with study participants—and prioritize projects we could complete with online data collection or existing public databases. Slowly but surely, some hope started to return to the room.

We discussed the steady stream of conference cancellations, and I speculated that every
After discussing our contingency plans, I wanted to end the meeting on a positive note. We turned the conversation to ways we could learn something from the current pandemic and, quite possibly, make a positive impact on public health. Our lab studies many topics that are relevant to the pandemic, including fake news, conspiracy theories, cooperation, polarization, and moral judgment. We realized that many of our projects could easily be altered to gather new insights about the spread of the virus and potentially design interventions to help people engage in the kind of health behaviors that might mute the pandemic.

One of my Ph.D. students had already altered the methods of one of her studies to examine conspiracy theory beliefs about COVID-19. She shared her preliminary results, clearly demonstrating that she was already learning something interesting. She invited suggestions for other analyses and proposed some ideas for follow-up studies. That helped the entire group see how our projects might be relevant to the topic.

We launched into a brainstorming session about how we could pivot our own research to understand more about the pandemic. We talked about adjusting a few of our ongoing studies and sparking up new collaborations with scholars in other countries to get a handle on this global crisis. We recognized that even the most elementary findings might be relevant to policymakers and the public given the urgency of the issue.

An hour after our meeting ended, one of my students texted me that she and other group members had come up with a brand new project to examine ideas about why some people failed to grasp the severity of the risk and the possibility for the exponential spread of COVID-19. I ran back to our meeting room and we quickly designed a series of studies as an entire team, initially scribbling ideas on the whiteboard and then drafting a shared Google document. The room came to life with suggestions, solutions, and fresh ideas on a topic that impacted all of us. I then had a series of one-on-one meetings with each student to decompress and map out their own individual plans. Throughout the rest of the day, several lab members told me they were already feeling much better and excited about trying to make a difference.
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