

COVID-19: How to persuade patients to practice social distancing

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Minimizing contact with others by staying home and practicing social distancing can help health systems better meet the needs of those who may have COVID-19. While many people are following recommendations by working from home and canceling trips, others view these precautions as an overreaction. As the need for people to stay home and practice social distancing remains crucial, how do you get more individuals to comply?

In an unprecedented open letter to the American people, the AMA, American Hospital Association and American Nurses Association are calling on people to stay at home to help reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus and limit its long-term health effect on the country. Learn more about how staying at home can help slow the spread of COVID-19.

“We are assuming that some patients with COVID-19 will have minimal symptoms or might not have symptoms and that they can infect other individuals that might be at higher risks for poor outcomes,” said Odaliz Abreu Lanfranco, MD, an infectious disease expert at Henry Ford Health System in Detroit, an AMA Health System Program Partner. “By slowing the spread of COVID-19, they help their providers be able to provide the appropriate care because not everybody will come at once to the hospital.”

“That’s kind of the effect of flattening the curve. It’s just trying to reduce the bulk of infected individuals that can come into the hospital at once,” he said.

Dr. Abreu Lanfranco provides some advice to help convince people to practice social distancing and remain at home to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Make it personal

Many people who feel healthy or think they won't be exposed to COVID-19 need to hear a personal reason why they should stay home. By making it personal, it shows just how connected everyone is during this pandemic.

"Some of us will feel I'm going to do fine regardless, so even if I get the disease, I'm just going to be one of the 80% who will be fine, but we never know who's going to be the other 20% that might be at risk of getting sick," said Dr. Abreu Lanfranco. "That's because you have to think about in the big scheme of things that by slowing down the spread of this disease, if you stay home you are preventing hundreds individuals getting infected if at any point you have the virus."

"It's not just affecting the one person, but in about five cycles of infection, you can be spreading this to hundreds of individuals and that's the magnitude of why this is so important that everybody do their part," he said.

Directive from states

On a larger scale, some states have already issued stay-at-home measures to prevent or slow the spread of COVID-19.

"By doing that, it is limiting the social pressure of 'I need to be at work regardless,'" said Dr. Abreu Lanfranco. "That is a decision that at times you will need to think about what the risks and benefits are of staying at home."

"Making it more of a directive from the state makes it less of someone feeling guilty about not going out, but also understanding that if it is a rule, it's what everybody is supposed to be doing," he said, adding that it is "not at the discretion of the individual, but that everybody should be doing this at the same time."

This is not isolation

Let people know that "this is not an isolation," said Dr. Abreu Lanfranco. "If you need to go out there are a lot of things that you can do to not feel isolated," such as walking the dog, getting gas in the car, and going to the grocery store or pharmacy as needed.

“It is important to understand that this social distancing is the right thing to do,” he said, adding that people can go outside and talk to their neighbors “as long as they maintain infection prevention measures of keeping their distance about six feet because that’s how far the droplets can actually be carried if you cough and are mindful about that potential transmission.”

“The communication part shouldn’t be a reason to be isolated. You can have a sense of normalcy during these times as well,” said Dr. Abreu Lanfranco.

Share your story

Physicians and other health professionals across the country are sharing signs that read, “We stay here for you. Please stay home for us.” This is an important part of sharing that “we are trying to do our best to care for individuals, but, as you can imagine, it is difficult to try to provide help when we don’t have the resources to do so,” said Dr. Abreu Lanfranco.

“If we run out of some beds in the hospital or we run out of life saving mechanisms such as ventilators or we don’t have enough medications, it will be really hard for any of us to make decisions,” he said, adding that when these doctors and other health professionals are sharing those images “it’s just bringing some of their message to be a personal message of ‘I’m doing this for you.’”

The AMA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are closely monitoring the COVID-19 global pandemic. Learn more at the [AMA COVID-19 resource center](https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/covid-19-how-persuade-patients-practice-social-distancing) and consult the AMA’s physician guide to COVID-19.