

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

It's Okay to Say "No" to Social Events During Covid

by [Ashley Whillans](#) , [Annie Wilson](#) and [Tobias Schlager](#)

August 06, 2020

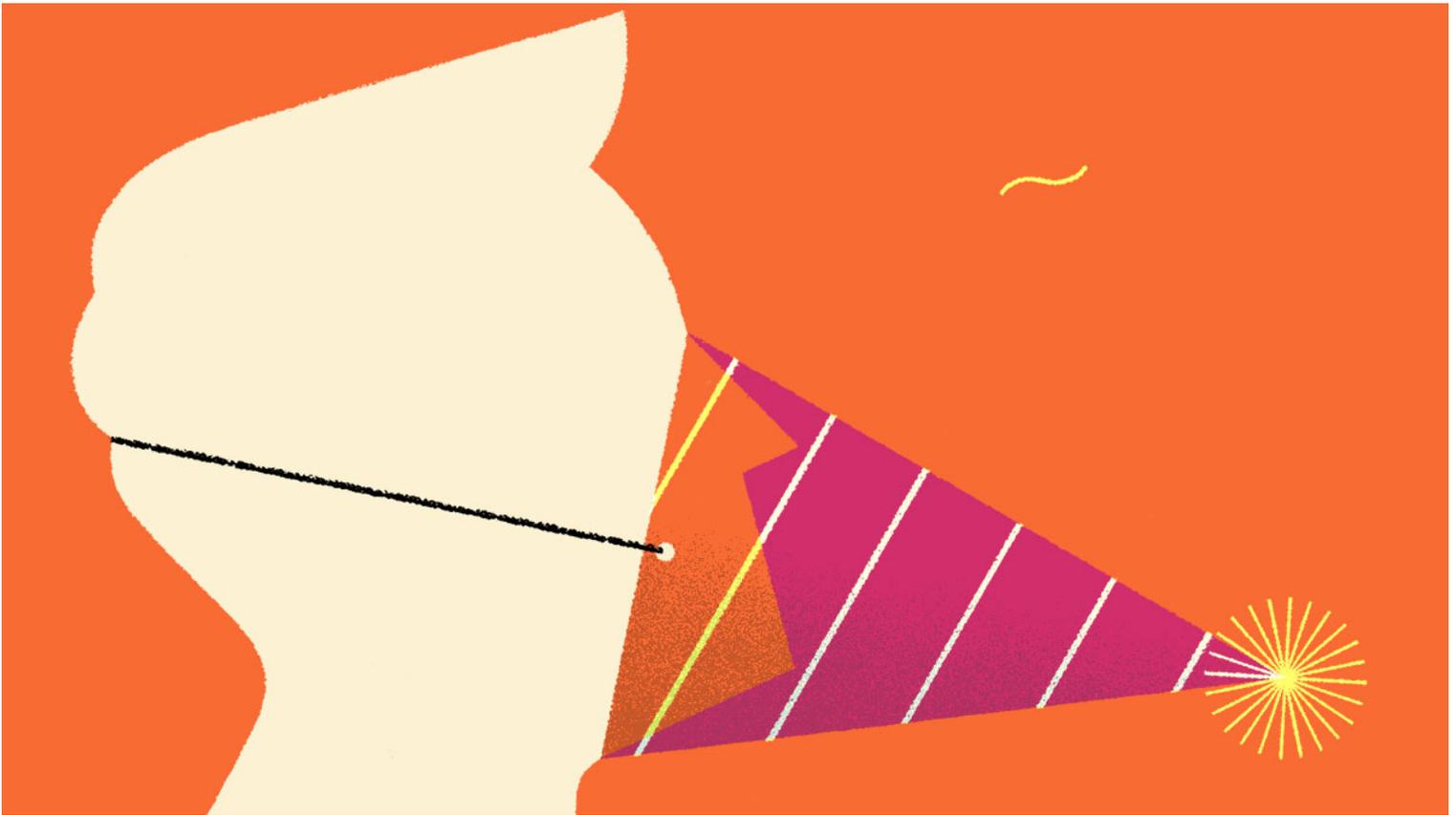


Illustration by Matt Clough

We've made our coronavirus coverage free for all readers. To get all of HBR's content delivered to your inbox, sign up for the Daily Alert newsletter.

Recently, a friend from college invited one of us on a hike with a relatively large group of people, some of whom we didn't know. What would have once been a carefree outing now put us in a difficult predicament. With Covid cases still high in Boston and rising across the U.S. – not to mention a family member with an illness that put them at greater risk – we felt conflicted.

We wanted to say “no” to the hike, but we didn't want to offend our friend. We also wanted to remind our friend that they should still have been social distancing, and that a large group activity like this hike carried significant risk.

What should we do in a situation like this? Say yes despite our concerns? Say no with no explanation? Or say no and communicate the Covid-related risks? As social restrictions lift, we are likely to find ourselves facing these difficult decisions more often. Should we reject invitations to in-person events from friends and family? And if we do, should we communicate our concerns, or keep them to ourselves?

FURTHER READING



Coronavirus: Leadership and Recovery

Book

\$22.95

[View Details](#)

To examine this question, our team conducted a series of five experiments with more than 3,000 American working adults, looking at the interpersonal costs of communicating Covid-related concerns when saying “no” to friends. When we turn down a friend's invitation to a social event and consider reminding them about the

Covid-related risks, many of us may worry that they will think we're being judgmental, overly cautious, and even condescending. But our studies suggest that these fears are misguided. Our research showed that people are actually more receptive and less hurt than expected when they receive rejections accompanied by explanations of Covid-related concerns.

In one study, people imagined the very scenario that we ourselves had faced: being invited on a hike and feeling uncomfortable accepting the invitation. Some participants imagined that they were the ones doing the rejecting, while others imagined being the recipient of the rejection. We then varied whether the rejection included a mention of Covid-related risk. In the *no risk* condition, the excuse provider simply said, “I’m sorry, but I can’t go on the hike,” without providing a reason. In the *risk* condition, the excuse provider said, “I’m sorry, but I can’t. And I don’t think you should go either. Hanging out in groups of any size risks spreading coronavirus more.” Here, the excuse provider said no *and* provided a risk-related reason for declining.

Although excuse providers imagined that their friend would feel less close to them, we found that excuse receivers actually reported feeling closer to their friends after receiving a rejection that mentioned risks. Moreover, after hearing their friends’ concerns, the excuse receivers expressed less interest in attending the event, and even felt appreciative for the reminder that social events contribute to the spread of Covid. They thought their friend was a *more* moral and caring person for voicing their concerns.

We then ran several follow-up studies to explore when people were more or less likely to communicate their reasons for declining these social events. We found that people were less likely to express concerns around Covid-related risk when they were focused on social concerns (i.e., leaving a good impression) than when they were focused on welfare concerns (i.e., keeping their communities safe). This means we are especially unlikely to communicate our concerns if the invitation is coming from someone on whom we are particularly worried about making a good impression, such as a colleague or boss.

Interestingly, we also found evidence that people are more likely to say “yes” to their close friends. This is not only because they are more worried about maintaining these closer relationships, but also because, as we found in another paper (based on seven studies with 4,000 respondents, including two nationally representative studies of Canadians and Americans), they are less likely to think that their friends could get infected with Covid-19.

These findings underscore the importance of social impressions: We care what others think of us, often more than we should. As we have shown in other research, we frequently overestimate the costs of rejecting social events, leading us to attend events and say “yes” to tasks we do not have time for, and — as is the case in the current crisis — put ourselves in potentially unsafe situations.

One caveat to note is that these studies all relied exclusively on self-reported data and have yet to be replicated with research based on actual social behavior. Nevertheless, our results suggest that when we are contemplating rejecting a social event but don’t want to offend the host, we can be more candid about saying “no” — and citing risk-related reasons — than we might think.

To make these conversations less uncomfortable, we should remind ourselves of the welfare-related reasons we want to decline the invitation, such as our own health and/or the health of our loved ones. Focusing on welfare concerns instead of social concerns can help us gain the courage both to say “no” and to communicate the risks. And we should feel confident when we do so: Our data suggests that the real interpersonal benefits are likely to outweigh the imagined costs.

If our free content helps you to contend with these challenges, please consider subscribing to HBR. A subscription purchase is the best way to support the creation of these resources.



Ashley Whillans is an assistant professor in the negotiations, organizations, and markets unit at the Harvard Business School. Her research focuses on time, money, and happiness. Her first book *Time Smart: How to Reclaim Your Time & Live a Happier Life* will be published by Harvard Business Publishing in October 2020.

Annie Wilson is a behavioral data scientist at The Vanguard Group. She holds a PhD in marketing from Harvard Business School. Her work focuses on financial decision-making and well-being.

Tobias Schlager is Assistant Professor of Marketing at HEC Lausanne, University of Lausanne. He holds a PhD in Business, with a particular focus on marketing, from the University of St. Gallen. His research interest focuses on the consumer decision making in technology-mediated environments and with a focus on the consequences of novel phenomena as gamification, social interactions, and virtual reality. His research was published in the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, the Journal of Consumer Psychology, the Journal of Management Information Systems, and the Journal of Marketing.

This article is about DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

 Follow This Topic

Related Topics: [Psychology](#)

Comments

Leave a Comment

Post Comment

3 COMMENTS

Michael Costelloe 21 minutes ago

Another approach would be to let your friend know that you have COVID-related concerns without telling them that you don't think they should be going either. It should be enough to speak for yourself without volunteering an opinion on their choices.

 Reply

 [Join The Conversation](#)

POSTING GUIDELINES