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## Strengthening coronavirus response through behavioural understanding: Capacities and opportunities for voluntary protection

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The Omicron variant poses additional challenges to the nation in an already difficult COVID-19 situation. This memorandum presents information related to voluntary protection and motivation, which was collected in anticipation of new virus variants. Data was collected via the Citizens' Pulse survey commissioned by the Prime Minister's Office, and an interview survey of young adults in late autumn 2021. Based on the results, citizens are mostly very positive about COVID-19 mitigation efforts. However, people's situations and realities differ, and the various protective behaviours are perceived in very different ways, which in turn affects behaviour and the effectiveness of measures. Social distancing is perceived much more difficult than, for example, using a face mask. What is particularly noteworthy is the fact that new research information on the main mechanism of COVID-19 transmission has not reached a significant number of citizens, who therefore consider air hygiene unimportant.

### Practical conclusions:

- Clarification of the mechanism of COVID-19 transmission makes measures more justified and voluntary protection more effective. A significant portion of the population is unaware of airborne transmission of COVID-19: the virus is mainly transmitted by inhalation of air containing virus particles exhaled by an infected person.
- Communicating the reliability of home tests may encourage their use if we want to speed up community-based contact tracing with home tests.
- Backlogged contact tracing can be supported by encouraging citizens to communicate a positive test result to those with whom they have had close contact. This kind of communication is viewed very positively.
- Raising the mask recommendation to FFP2 is an opportunity to enhance protection: people have largely become accustomed to wearing masks, and routine use in public spaces is not experienced as burdensome.
- Encouraging safe meetings with one's intimate circle (while cutting back on other contacts) can support citizens' mental health and crisis resilience: long-term (more than two months) social distancing is perceived as the most burdening of COVID-19 mitigation efforts.

### Why is protection needed in addition to vaccination?

Behavioural measures are needed alongside vaccines, as vaccinated persons can also transmit the virus and become ill (including post-COVID-19 conditions). Although vaccination protects against severe disease, it does not prevent the transmission of the virus or provide herd immunity. **Every COVID-19 mitigation effort is incomplete on its own, but the combination of several deficient measures creates synergies<sup>1</sup>.**

When it is difficult to increase vaccination coverage, behavioural measures may be effective in controlling the situation. **A large proportion of Finns (89%) still consider it necessary to protect themselves and others<sup>2</sup>** from coronavirus transmission even after two vaccine doses. Concern for their closest contacts is a guiding factor of protective action for many people.

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<sup>1</sup> Leon et al., 2021

<sup>2</sup> Citizens' Pulse 8–13 December 2021

## Factors affecting the use of protective measures

Surveys in several countries have reported lower compliance with COVID-19 guidelines in younger age groups, and compliance also appears to decrease over time, especially among young men. Although the fear of falling ill is generally lower among young people, they may even be more concerned about the health of their loved ones and prosocial (beneficial for others) motives may sustain protective behaviour.

Citizens' Pulse has been used to monitor the experiences of different age groups almost since the beginning of the pandemic. Looking at some of the data more closely through regression analysis (2 April 2020–14 June 2021), it can be noted that compliance with the COVID-19 guidelines is related to age — 15–29-year-olds follow the guidelines the least — but the difference between the youngest and oldest age groups has decreased since the early days. In general, women follow the guidelines somewhat better than men.

Citizens' Pulse has also monitored the stress experienced by 15–29-year-olds, which has been significantly higher than in other age groups since the first autumn of the pandemic in 2020, and this difference has only increased. People who live alone experience more stress than people with family, and women experience more stress than men.

Since November 2021, Citizens' Pulse has monitored three factors that are important for protective behaviour: 1) the ease of the measure, 2) its perceived effectiveness, and 3) how long one could follow the measure. Eight protective measures that can be implemented independently were selected: wearing a face mask, reporting an infection to one's acquaintances, air hygiene (ventilation and air purification), home tests, avoiding public events, social distancing indoors, self-quarantine and use of a COVID-19 passport.



“Estimate how long you would be prepared to apply the following measures, if they were recommended while the pandemic situation in your locality worsened?” Source: Citizens’ Pulse”

With cluster analysis, we can identify three groups among the respondents. First of all, there are the “adopters” (just over half of the respondents), who are extremely positive about all measures and are prepared to continue observing them for a long time. The second group, the “positive sceptics” (a little more than a quarter of the respondents), are fairly positive about the measures, but their experiences, unlike those of the *adopters*, could be improved. The third group consists of the “sceptics” (about one-fifth of the respondents), who find most of the measures more inconvenient than the other groups and often do not consider them very effective. When interpreting the results, it must be noted that the survey is somewhat more likely to be responded to by people who are positive about the measures than the population on average. On the other hand, the data was collected before the appearance of the Omicron variant, which has increased people’s willingness for protective measures. Of the choice of measures, the respondents had the most positive view of telling others about being infected and of wearing face masks, which also involved the least uncertainties. The attitude towards home tests was the most divisive among respondents. Questions related to home tests and air hygiene were most frequently answered “Don’t know/Can’t say”.

We particularly wanted to deepen our understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of 16–35-year-old city-dwellers towards COVID-19 restrictions, their imposition and

compliance with them. The interview study of 20 semi-structured thematic interviews in November 2021 was conducted in cooperation with Kuudes design agency. The interviewees were selected from different types of households, striving to obtain as wide a range as possible of attitudes towards COVID-19 mitigation efforts.

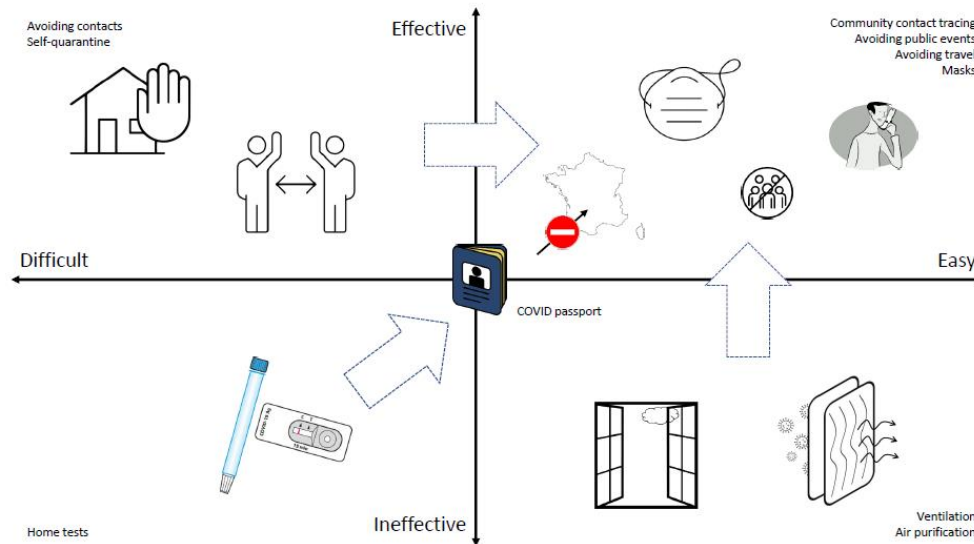
The interviews revealed, among other things, that the ease of the measure is influenced by the experience of its impact on one's daily life. The effectiveness and ease with which the various measures were associated depended on the interviewee's attitude towards COVID-19 restrictions. Those who were critical of COVID-19 mitigation efforts felt that almost all the measures were ineffective, except for telling others about being infected. In general, people had the most positive stance on *telling others about being infected*. However, *social distancing* was considered challenging by almost everyone, although it was considered one of the most effective measures. People considered their closest contacts to be safer company than other people, and even though they otherwise wore a mask conscientiously, it was not felt necessary in the company of the most intimate contacts. Many people had created routines for mask use, which made it less burdensome.

*Self-quarantine*, on the other hand, divided opinions – it was considered effective, but for many people it was not possible, for example due to work. People were largely prepared to continue *avoiding public events*, although many hoped that they could be organised in a COVID-safe manner. The interviewees were also prepared to avoid travel, especially if it involved a quarantine recommendation. *COVID-19 home tests* were perceived as easy, but many doubted their reliability, and they were also deemed expensive in continuous use. Home testing was often not considered to be a particularly effective measure, as many said they preferred to take an “official” test to confirm infection – although the difficulty of accessing PCR testing was also mentioned in the interviews.

The *COVID-19 passport* was a measure that caused a clear divide. Those who were in favour of the COVID-19 passport considered it an effective and easy measure, while others thought that it discriminated against people, failed to prevent transmission of the virus and called into question the voluntary nature of COVID-19 vaccination. Many thought it a good way to ensure that businesses could remain open, and it created a sense of security for them. The participants did not consider *ventilation and air purification* to be associated with transmission of COVID-19 but with cleaning, and through that, surface hygiene. Thus, communication to promote air hygiene should be based on clarification of the main transmission mechanism<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Greenhalgh et al., 2021


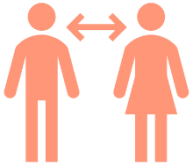




*Summary of the placement of voluntary COVID-19 mitigation efforts on the ease-effectiveness axis, as well as the objectives of communication and support measures as depicted by arrows.*

**Many of the interviewees described that they had followed the news about the recommendations and restrictions more closely at the beginning of the pandemic but were not aware of all the measures currently in place. The perceptions of coronavirus transmission revealed in the interviews reflected the situation in the first half of 2020, when the role of aerosol transmission was not yet understood.**

**Current recommendations, the severity of the situation and the behaviour of other people have a major impact on how well restrictions are complied with. If everyone around you follows a measure, you will not find it so burdensome.**

The clarity and comprehensibility of communication is of great importance for the perceived effectiveness of measures.

	<p><b>The experience of the effectiveness of the measures is particularly influenced by how it has been communicated in the media and by the authorities.</b></p> <p>For example, home tests and regular ventilation generated the most uncertainty: it had been communicated that home tests were not as reliable as the official tests, and airborne transmission of the virus was not well-known as the main route of transmission.</p>
	<p><b>The measures involving avoidance of other people were considered the most effective, but at the same time they were seen as the most difficult to comply with.</b></p> <p>Self-quarantine and social distancing were perceived as effective, but difficult to comply with. The avoidance of public events was viewed more positively as a temporary measure.</p>
	<p><b>The protective measures perceived as easiest were those that have less impact on everyday life, have already become routine and are straightforward to comply with thanks to clear guidelines and recommendations.</b></p> <p>For example, self-quarantine leaves room for interpretation, which makes it more challenging to comply with. In addition, it has a major impact on people's daily lives and is particularly difficult for families to implement during common cold season.</p>
	<p><b>In turn, the ease of measures affects the length of time for which the various measures can be complied with.</b></p> <p>For example, social distancing is impossible for many to comply with, as the need for social contact is great.</p>

### **“All-or-nothing” thinking colours critical perspectives**

Those who were critical of measures felt their incompleteness made them useless: masks are not worn 100% correctly, so they are of no use at all; vaccinated persons can get sick and infect others, so vaccination does not provide protection; social distancing is more effective than ventilation, so ventilation is futile. In addition, it was possible to perceive all measures as ineffective, as COVID-19 could still spread despite the efforts – justifying non-compliance to any measures. The toughest critics saw the measures as a whole as part of controlling people, which is not limited to fighting COVID-19. In this case, they consider (almost) all the measures equally unreliable and ineffective. Some critics also thought that the various measures were a way of gradually forcing people to take the vaccine and of creating confrontation. They also

felt that the risks of COVID-19 did not apply to them but only to a small group of people at highest risk of severe illness. **Critical interviewees also called for clarity and consistency in communication about COVID-19 mitigation efforts. Those who were critical felt a need to be heard and accounted for**, as the absence of such creates mistrust of guidelines and restrictions. The experience of confrontation may be due to the fact that they feel that their situation and thoughts are not understood or taken seriously.

The “panic myth” is the idea that citizens’ *concerns* should be actively diminished in order for them not to lose control. Based on research data, however, communication that arouses trust and proportionate action – including in critics – consists of conveying the most *accurate* information about the situation <sup>4</sup>.

## Conclusions

There are many differences in how the voluntary COVID-19 mitigation efforts are perceived:

- People are most tired of social distancing.
- People are used to face masks and are able to continue wearing them for a long time, but there was still uncertainty about FFP2 masks, which protect the wearer as well as others.
- People are unaware of the main route of transmission, i.e. airborne transmission, so the associated protective measures are not seen as justified.
- People are prepared to avoid public events and travel.
- People are uncertain of the reliability of home tests and consider them expensive.
- People are ready to inform others of a positive test result.
- Strict, short-term (e.g. two months) measures are tolerated better than loose, long-term ones.

For many, the perception of effective protective measures and transmission routes of coronavirus formed in the early stages of the pandemic, when people followed COVID-related news more frequently. However, now the news has become more commonplace, which is why measures that were widely reported at the beginning, such as hand hygiene and mask use, have been best remembered by people and have become new routines. On the other hand, people are uncertain of the effectiveness of “newer” measures, such as COVID-19 home tests and regular ventilation, as there has been less communication about them – or conflicting messages about, for example, the effectiveness of COVID-19 home tests.

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<sup>4</sup> Petersen, 2021



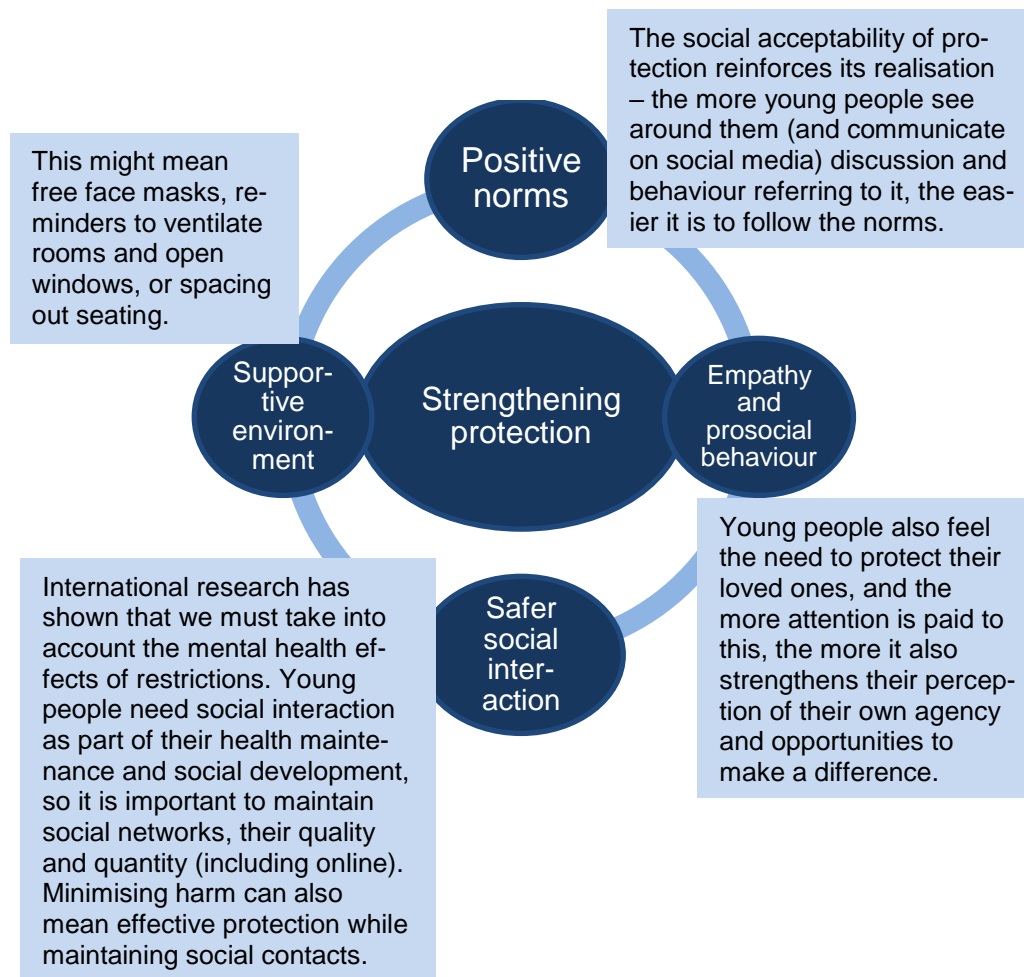
**People want clear, simple and consistent recommendations for different protective measures. Otherwise, there is a great deal of room for interpretation.** The problem with increasing the clarity of communication is that measures often lack context: “Always wear a mask in public indoor spaces” is clear, because it applies in the same way everywhere. On the other hand, mask use in different situations, for example at the workplace or when meeting friends, involves considerably more exceptions, the inclusion of which in the guidelines inevitably increases their complexity. It should be considered if the communication of more context-bound situations could be implemented by those who know the context; for example, employers, health and safety representatives at workplaces, designated security directors in condominiums or third sector organisations could be trained and encouraged to communicate about COVID-19 mitigation efforts in the environments for which they are experts.

The fluctuation of restrictions from tighter to looser and back again affects people’s motivation and routines after the routines have been dismantled. Hence, returning to the previous situation may be more challenging. In addition, a mandate is considered clearer than a recommendation, although it mainly serves as a motivational device for those with a critical stance. Measures must therefore be communicated in such a way that the individual does not have to puzzle over the correct procedure. When more people follow the guidelines, such as the mask recommendation, social pressure also works on those who are more critical of the measures.

Communication should clearly state the overall strategy, including the basics of protective measures, concrete instructions for action, the distinction between necessary and discretionary measures, as well as a vision for the future.

Testing, masks and ventilation do not significantly disrupt life, and they allow society to remain open. The more smoothly these measures can be maintained, the easier protection becomes. When we adhere to tried and tested yet easy measures, confidence in and awareness of the government’s strategy will also help to communicate COVID-19 mitigation efforts in a committed and long-term manner. **This helps avoid unexpected changes and emergency measures that burden administrative resources and slow down the promotion of longer-term solutions, for example through research and participatory civil dialogue.**

## Behavioural science strategies for strengthening the COVID-19 resilience of young (and older) people (WHO, June 2021)



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