Why behaviour post-lockdown may look no different, despite the disruption

The way many people live and work has changed with the restrictions enforced by Covid-19. Routines have been disrupted, activities restricted and the environment around us transformed. But as Jessica Exton explains, our behaviour may revert once lockdown is eased

Many of us have already experienced social distancing and accompanying lockdown measures for months. For some, day-to-day behaviour has changed little, for others, the difference has been dramatic.

When restrictions are lifted many aspects of daily life will be welcomed back, quite literally, with open arms. Visiting and embracing family members and predictable trips to the supermarket are things many will be missing.

Yet it is also likely that some of our new behaviour will be worth keeping. Cooking at home, exercising daily, working remotely, and connecting with neighbours are all activities we may be doing more of now, and which would be nice to maintain.

But will a disruption to our daily routines as significant as several months of lockdown have a lasting influence? Research suggests it's not so straightforward.

Change is hard

Losing weight, increasing exercise, stopping smoking or cutting back on alcohol are each known to be difficult. These examples demonstrate that changing our behaviour is challenging.

And even in response to a big life event, research suggests change isn't guaranteed. One study of people who had suffered a life-threatening cardiac event, found that they weren't likely to stop smoking, eat more healthily, and exercise post-scare. Even this most serious of threats caused few to change their lifestyle. Just 52% stopped smoking, 39% ate more healthily and 35% said they became more physically active. Only 4.3% made all three changes.

Changing behaviour is not only hard, but also complicated. This white paper, released last week, explains that to make healthy lifestyle changes after a cardiac event, patients are often asked to remember and collect large amounts of information and to continually correctly judge when to apply it. This isn't done in isolation, but while patients are "surrounded by conflicts and pressures, situational demands and internal stressors" that are part of daily life. Having information on what to change isn't enough.

This holds true for many behaviours. Information and intent aren't the only requirements. For behaviour to alter long-term, either it should be enabled and made easy by our environment, or it should become near-automatic so that we do it with little effort. Lasting behaviour change requires choice environments that convert the initial focused attention on a new behaviour, into long-term habits and norms.

Environment and behavioural change

Behavioural scientists commonly use what is known as the COM-B model as a framework to support behavioural change. The model demonstrates that change occurs when three elements are present: a person should be capable of making the change, there should be an opportunity to adopt the new behaviour, and they should be motivated to do it. We must have the capability, opportunity and motivation.

For example, many people might have decided to exercise more during the lockdown period. This change may have been supported by having more free time without the need to commute to work, or the relative novelty of leaving the house. These lockdown-imposed features tick the COM-B requirements. We are capable because we can go for a run, we have the opportunity because we have more free time, and spending time out of the house is a luxury, making it attractive and motivating. But once we enter a post-coronavirus environment, some of these elements will be difficult to maintain. The time saved not commuting may disappear, for example, meaning that the opportunity to exercise is no longer guaranteed, even though a person is capable and motivated.

Habit and behavioural change

Whether new behaviours stick around post-lockdown will also rely on how many times they are repeated and how automatic, or habitual they become. The longer circumstances remain, the more likely habits may stick. Building a habit requires a regular cue to prompt action which is reinforced by a reward. Repeating that action supports automation and reduces the effort required through a process known as chunking. When we repeat an action enough times, we 'bring together bits of information into a coherent whole', simplifying the process into a smooth,

practiced action and making it more likely to stick around. But while there is inconclusive evidence on how long a habit takes to form - it depends on the type of activity, prompt and feedback, as well as how often it occurs - new behaviours may need many repetition if they are guaranteed to stick post-lockdown.

Behavioural changes made during lockdown are more likely to last if our environment continues to prompt and support them, or if our new behaviour becomes a habit. While we will be looking forward to many changes going back to normal as restrictions start to lift, for those behaviours we are hoping to change long-term, it may be useful to recognise that they won't automatically stick around. It will most likely take a little conscious effort to keep them around.