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Commentary

COVID-19 Disease Risk and Unrealistic Optimism

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DESCRIPTION

Risk perception and, as a result, actions to prevent illness are frequently out of sync with actual infection, morbidity, and mortality risks. When people have unrealistic optimism, they assume that their own outcomes will be better than those of others in the same risk category. If the benefits of overconfidence, such as psychological resilience, outweigh the risks, natural selection may favor it. However, just because optimism biases may have provided evolutionary benefits in the past does not mean they are always optimum. The current study looked at the links between personal COVID-19 risk, risk perceptions, and preventative activities. We hypothesized that people at higher risk of severe COVID-19 would be unrealistically optimistic and act in ways that contradicted their higher risk of morbidity and mortality. COVID-19 threat evaluation, compliance with shelter-in-place orders and travel limitations, compliance with public health advice, and potential confounders were all used to establish clinical risk ratings for severe COVID-19. Similar self-reported COVID-19 knowledge in a large dataset of 492 people from McLennan County, Texas, USA. While those at high clinical risk accepted that they were more likely to develop serious illness if infected, they also believed they were less likely to become infected in the first place. While it's possible that those with higher clinical risk ratings are genuinely less likely to become infected, the pattern and significance of these findings remained after accounting for possible occupational exposure, household size, and other risk factors. More recent travel inside Texas and less concern during the pandemic were also associated with higher clinical risk. Additional behavioral data revealed that those with higher clinical risk levels did not react any differently during the shelter-in-place order than those with lower levels. While exaggerated optimism may give some short-term psychological benefits, it may also be dangerous due to inaccurate assessments of hazardous situations; inferring that optimism bias has evolutionary origins does not mean that it is a bad thing. Unrealistic optimism is a prevalent trait among humans. Despite the potential cost of encouraging risky conduct in the face of unknown results, false optimism may provide psychological and physiological advantages. During the COVID-19 pandemic, which is linked to mental health and sleep difficulties, decreased worry associated with unrealistic optimism may improve mental well-being in some people. Overconfidence can boost productivity by boosting morale and perseverance. Overconfidence may also reduce productivity by setting unreasonable goals and failing to achieve them, resulting in psychological and financial difficulties. Given the potential benefits of overconfidence, it has been hypothesized that natural selection favors positively biased affect, beliefs, and attitudes. Behavior associated with optimism biases has been seen in a range of non-human animal species, supporting this idea. Despite some of the above-mentioned psychological benefits, unrealistic optimism can be dangerous owing to inaccurate assessments of risky situations, and just because optimism bias has evolutionary roots does not indicate that it is always the best option. Unrealistic optimism about one's chances of contracting SARS-CoV-2 or developing severe COVID-19 disease, for example, may be maladaptive, leading to activities that enhance one's risk of infection. If infected, this could be especially dangerous for persons who are at high risk of developing severe COVID-19 disease. In the case of COVID-19, an illness that affects a large number of people.

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