

November 17, 2020

David A. Kessler, MD  
Professor of Pediatrics, Epidemiology, Biostatistics  
University of California San Francisco

Vivek Murthy, MD, MBA  
Former Surgeon General of the U.S.  
Member, Biden-Harris Transition  
Team Advisory Board

Marcella Nunez-Smith, MD, MHS  
Associate Professor of Internal Medicine,  
Yale University  
Associate Dean for Health Equity Research  
Yale School of Medicine

Dear Dr. Kessler, Dr. Murthy, and Dr. Nunez-Smith:

As President of the Association for Psychological Science (APS), and on behalf of our 30,000 members, I congratulate you on your appointment to serve as co-chairs of President-elect Biden's Transition COVID-19 Advisory Board. My colleagues and I are deeply grateful for your ongoing work to fight the pandemic.

The president-elect's decisive actions regarding the pandemic are very encouraging. Specifically, the Advisory Board you co-chair is composed of leading scientists from diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise. This is the right step to take. I fully trust your advice and counsel. Nevertheless, I was disheartened to see no psychologists on the Board. While the virus is a biological entity, its spread is governed by human behavior. Therefore, until an effective vaccine or treatment is available, mitigating the virus's spread and impact requires the fullest possible understanding of human psychology and social behavior. Accordingly, I strongly urge you to consider adding a psychological scientist to the Advisory Board.

Psychological science expertise will prove indispensable to devise community-level strategies and interventions to contain the virus. It will also be instrumental in persuading people to take vaccination when the vaccines are made available. It may also help address mental traumas of bereavement, job loss, and loneliness and reduce racial disparities in the suffering from the pandemic. As Dr. Murthy observes in his important book published earlier this year, "Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World," the psychology of social relations has powerful effects on health and wellbeing. This same observation can extend to several other areas. Please consider the following examples:


- First, the volume of empirical work on persuasion, attitude change, and trust will be critical in encouraging health-promoting behaviors such as mask-wearing, avoiding crowded spaces, and taking the vaccination.

- Second, theories and evidence on judgment, decision-making, and overconfidence will be indispensable to shedding light on people's cognitive biases and errors in risk perception.
- Third, the same objective information (e.g., the risk of the virus) may have very different effects on judgment, decision making, and social behavior, depending on its cognitive framing by, for example, the rate of death or survival. Such framing effects will be critical for developing and promoting norms of social responsibility.
- Fourth, research and theory on self-control, emotion regulation, and clinical psychopathology will be crucial in addressing anxiety, loneliness, depression, suicidal impulses, and other mental health symptoms that have become prevalent during the pandemic.
- Fifth, we must carefully examine why there is a disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minority communities and what can be done to address this health disparity. Here again, the cumulative science of racism, prejudice, and discrimination is invaluable.

I genuinely believe that psychological scientists possess tools to help the country overcome the current pandemic crisis. On behalf of APS and its members, I strongly encourage that you consider adding a psychological scientist versed in the most up-to-date literature on these and other relevant issues to the Advisory Board. We would be pleased to recommend scientists for your consideration or share additional information about any of the aforementioned points.

On behalf of APS, thank you sincerely for your ongoing work to fight this pandemic.

Sincerely,



Shinobu Kitayama  
President, Association for Psychological Science  
Robert B. Zajonc Professor of Psychology, University of Michigan