

# WHY? SOCIAL SCIENCE

## Because Small Tweaks to Behavior Can Be the Difference Between Life and Death

*By Lisa Sage, Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP) Contributing Writer*

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As a psychologist specializing in habits, decision-making, and behavior change and advisor to numerous health organizations and private companies, David Neal, Founder and Managing Partner of Catalyst Behavioral Sciences, LLC and Executive-in-Residence at Duke University's Center for Advanced Hindsight, uses behavioral science to help people improve their lives by changing their actions. Neal defines his field as "the science of understanding nonobvious pathways to help people achieve greater health and well-being then help them to stick with those healthier, happier choices and behaviors over time."

While his expertise runs the gamut from consumer decision-making to trademark litigation, Neal's most recent project delves into a particularly timely issue of global importance: the Zika virus.

As part of USAID's efforts to improve responses to Zika and prepare for future epidemics, Neal has joined forces with Johns Hopkins University's Center for Communications Programs. The [project](#), which is advised by prominent social scientists Wendy Wood, a professor of psychology and business at the University of Southern California, and Dan Ariely, a behavioral economist at Duke University, aims to identify ways to improve health outcomes for people in Guatemala and Honduras.

Neal will contribute ideas from social psychology and other behavioral sciences in order to identify ways to initiate and maintain habit changes in household behaviors that could improve health.

"The belief is that the more that cutting-edge social psychology can be brought in, the bigger the impact we can have in terms of solving big health challenges," said Neal.

The goal of the project is to empower global health workers with simple but powerful tools to assist in the prevention of mosquito-borne diseases. The experts hope to identify the behaviors people in different regions should be engaging in to prevent disease, such as removing standing water or cleaning out the water supply to eliminate mosquito larvae, and the social psychological principles that best promote changing a given behavior.



*David Neal*

According to Neal, “Social psychology offers a powerful toolkit for understanding and intervening to change behavior.”

For example, in some countries and regions, the failure to act in response to a Zika outbreak may be driven by feelings of low personal control over outcomes, by false beliefs about risk, or by “unthinking habits” that guide everyday practices in a household or community. Social psychology and other behavioral sciences have studied these processes in detail and have identified practical, evidence-based ways to intervene.

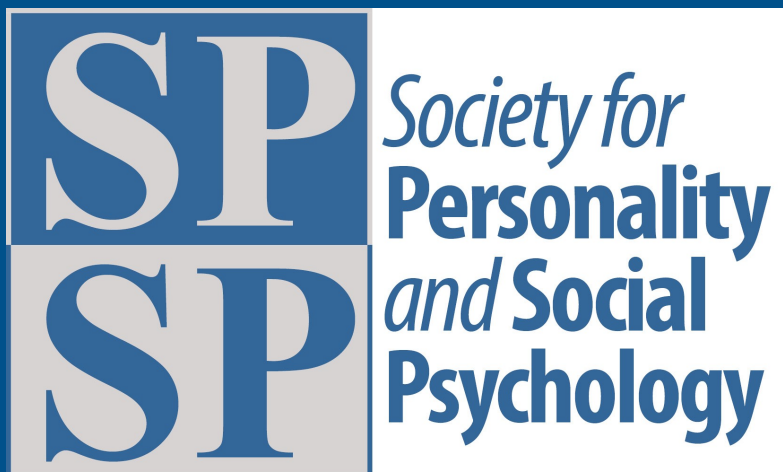
In many cases, this will involve integrating multiple ideas from academia into solutions tailored to different countries or even different communities. For example, Neal explained, initial evidence shows that “the best way to tackle behaviors in some communities may be through communication that piggybacks on people’s existing habits and simultaneously works to dispel the myth that Zika is a government conspiracy or beyond their personal control.”

In addition to his work on Zika, Neal has also contributed to another project seeking to improve health outcomes—the M-Pesa mobile health wallet in Kenya.

This project, led by Ting Jiang and Dan Ariely at Duke, builds on the growing popularity of mobile money across Africa. As Neal explained, mobile money is emerging as a “very powerful tool in getting people out of extreme poverty and saving for healthcare” because it makes saving simple and easy and allows donors to directly fund the healthcare needs of people in the developing world.

This project seeks to identify the psychological principles that could be used on both the donor and recipient side of the equation—that is, to help people in Africa sign up for the health wallet and make regular savings to it, and to help people in the developed world contribute to the costs of healthcare.

As research by David Neal and other social and behavioral scientists like him have shown, small tweaks to behavior that can have life-changing impacts on the health and well-being of people around the world.



*Lisa Sage is a contributing writer for the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP). SPSP promotes scientific research that explores how people think, behave, feel, and interact. SPSP is the largest organization of social and personality psychologists in the world.*