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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0bd1t0b0>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 43(43)

ISSN

1069-7977

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Publication Date

2021

Peer reviewed

Pandemic Panic: The Effect of Disaster-Related Stress on Negotiation Outcomes

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Abstract

Prior research often finds increased altruism following natural disasters. One explanation is the social heuristic hypothesis: humans are prosocial by nature but become self-interested when they have the opportunity to deliberate. As the stress of a disaster lowers people's ability to engage in effortful deliberation, their heuristic prosocial tendencies emerge. However, this link has often been explored with very simple tasks; here, we study the impact of COVID-related stress on outcomes in multi-issue negotiations with a computational virtual agent. In two experiments with a virtual negotiation partner, we explore two distinct pathways for how COVID-19 stress shapes prosocial behavior. Consistent with the social heuristic hypothesis, COVID-stress is correlated with giving, mediated by heuristic thinking. But COVID-stress also seems to enhance information-exchange and perspective taking, which allowed participants to grow more value which they could give away. Our results give new insights into the relationship between stress, cognition, and prosocial behavior.