

Public Health Messages for Emergency Situations



Learning Objectives

- Describe role of communications during an emergency
- Describe epidemiologist's communications role during an emergency
- State the risk communication principles for operating in a crisis
- Understand how communication messages are developed in a crisis
- Identify communication activities in the phases of a crisis: pre-event; event; post-event

Session Outline

- Introduction to risk communication
- Risk communication principles
- Audiences and messages
- Crisis communication phases

Introduction to Risk Communication

Communication Definitions

- Crisis communication:
 - Provides stakeholders & public information during a crisis
- Risk communication:
 - Provides information to stakeholders & public about the outcome of a behavior or exposure, including the type of outcome and magnitude of the outcome
- Emergency Risk Communication:
 - Combines the urgency of crisis communications with the need to communicate risks and benefits to stakeholders and the public

Decision-Making in an Emergency

- Must be made within narrow time frame
- May be irreversible
- May have uncertain outcome
- May have imperfect or incomplete information

Emergency Risk Communication Addresses Harmful Behaviors

Potential problems:

- Demands for unneeded treatment
- Illegal group behavior (stealing, looting)
- Stigmatization
- Reliance on special relationships
- Unreasonable trade and travel restrictions

Poor Communications Practices

- Mixed messages from multiple experts
- Information provided so late that it is irrelevant
- Over-reassuring messages
- Unrealistic recommendations
- Leaving myths and rumors unchallenged or uncorrected
- Unprepared or ineffective spokespersons

Good Communication Practices

- Execute a solid communication plan
- Being first source for information
- Expressing empathy early
- Showing competence and expertise
- Remaining honest and open

Emergency Communications

- Prevent illness, injury and death
- Prevent panic
- Promote helpful behaviors

Review Question #1

Identify which of the roles listed below is NOT one that communications should play in a public health emergency.

Providing information to the public and stakeholders:

- a) about potential outcomes
- b) to reduce risk
- c) from multiple experts with mixed messages
- d) that counters harmful behaviors
- e) to empower decision making

Answer: C

Epidemiologists & Risk Communication

- Directly communicate with
 - Health care and public health workers
 - Decision makers, supervisors and fellow scientists
- Indirectly communicate with
 - The media or other large groups

Role of a Spokesperson

Describe:

- What is the risk?
- How to avoid these risks
- The incident and its magnitude (e.g., who, what, where, when, why and how)
- What is being done to respond to the incident?

Risk Communication Principles

The STARCC Principle

Your public messages in a crisis must be:

Simple

Timely

Accurate

Relevant

Credible

Consistent

Risk Communication Principles

- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Acknowledge people's fear and express empathy
- Have 3 key messages you want to express
- Be clear and succinct
- Do not over-reassure
- Whenever possible, provide action steps for people to take
- Emphasize that there is a process in place
- Stop trying to allay panic
- Give people things to do
- Express messages in the simplest possible language
- Acknowledge that you share their grief and concern
- Express wishes
- Address "what if" questions
- Provide resources for additional information
- Give anticipatory guidance
- Be a role model

Acknowledge Uncertainty

- Share concern about the level of uncertainty
 - Tone
 - Content
 - “I very much wish I could give you a definite answer on that...”
- Acknowledge the authority’s distress as well as the public’s distress
 - “It must be difficult for people to hear how tentative we must be because there is still much that we do not know...”

Acknowledge People's Fear

- Acknowledge fears while giving public information they need to put those fears into context
 - “I understand that this is a scary situation, but here’s what you can do to protect yourself...”

Be Clear and Consistent

The best way public health authorities can reduce the likelihood of panic is to provide
clear and consistent messages

Emphasize: A Plan in Place

- During crisis, emphasize that there is a plan in place
 - “We have a system (plan, process) to help us respond (find answers, etc.)”

Don't Over-Reassure

- People need to be concerned and vigilant
 - Take all precautions
 - Feel fear that situation warrants
 - Follow crisis without obsessing over it
- Over-reassurance can backfire
 - Instead give realistic assessment
 - Be cautious in reporting numbers

Give People Things To Do

In an emergency, simple tasks will:

- Give people a sense of control
- Keep people motivated to pay attention
- Prepare people to take action when directed

NOTE: Offer a choice of actions matched to the level of concern

Express Wishes

Express empathy by expressing wishes:

- “I wish we knew more.”
- “I wish our answers were more definitive.”
- “I wish we all could have been spared this tragedy (incident, etc.)”
- “I wish our answers were more definitive, but we will continue to investigate and monitor this problem and we will keep you posted on our developments.”

Address “What If” Questions

Public desires expert advice/opinions

- “What if” questions:
 - May fuel speculation when possibly only a few people are affected
 - A different scenario might develop, and these questions may prepare for what may happen
 - May be answered someone else if the experts don't
 - May cause a loss in credibility if they aren't addressed by the public health authorities

Be a Role Model

- Perhaps the most important role of a spokesperson

Ask public to bear risk with you

- Model appropriate behavior

Additional Communication Principles

- Be regretful
 - Without being defensive
- Give anticipatory guidance
 - Let people know what to expect
- Acknowledge the shared misery
 - Then you can help people move forward

Review Question #2

The STARCC principle refers to characteristics of

- a. A spokesperson
- b. A risk communications message
- c. An emergency situation
- d. An epidemiologist

Answer: b. A risk communications message should be Simple, Timely, Accurate, Relevant, Credible, and Consistent

Review Question #3

Name two principles that guide the delivery of risk communications messages.

*Answer: Numerous answers are possible.
Some include:*

- *Acknowledge uncertainty*
- *Acknowledge people's fear and express empathy*
- *Have 3 key messages you want to express*
- *Be clear and succinct*

Audiences and Messages

Consider the Audience

- Concerns
- Attitudes
- Levels of Interest
- Levels of Involvement
- Histories
- Levels of Knowledge
- Opinions
- Reasons for Interest
- Types of Involvement

Addressing the Audience's Concerns

- Health
- Safety
- Environment
- Economics
- Aesthetics
- Fairness
- Process
- Legalities

Adapting to the Audience

Content and format differs *BUT* the process is identical

1. Define audience
2. Understand audience's concerns
3. Decide what the goals of communication are
4. Select correct media
5. Find the right tone
6. Adapt the content and language

Audience	Medium	Communication objective
Epidemiologist	Report	Documentation of the source
Public health managers	Abstract	Action
Political leaders	Briefing	Evidence that the situation is under control
Community	Press release, interview	Personal steps towards prevention
Scientific community	Presentation, manuscript	Scientific progress

Example:

Communicating with Nurses

- Define the audience
 - Nursing Association
- Understand the concern of the audience
 - Quality of care
- Decide what the goals of communication are
 - Endorse new Standard Operating Practices
- Select the right medium
 - Nurses Association bulletin

Basic Message Components

- An expression of empathy
- Clarification of facts
- What is not known
- A process for getting answers
- Statement of commitment
- Referrals for additional information

See Message Development Template

Review Question #4

Which of the following are characteristics of good communications messages? (Choose all that apply)

- a. It is universal (applies to all audiences)
- b. It communicates the facts
- c. It communicates what is unknown
- d. It contains an expression of empathy

Answer: b, c, and d.

(a. is not correct - a message does not have to apply to all audiences, it can be tailored to be appropriate for specific audiences)

Crisis Communication Phases

Phases of a Crisis





Pre-Event

Pre-Crisis Phase

Communications objectives:

- Be prepared with communication plan
- Foster alliances
- Develop consensus recommendations
- Test messages



Pre-Event

Epidemiologist's Role

- Review current risk communication plan
- Help develop/ revise communication plan
- Help develop preparedness recommendations
- Provide scientific information
- Identify the basic health communication & health education material



Event
(Initial)

Initial Phase

Communication objectives:

- Acknowledge event with empathy
- Inform public about risk and explain with plain language
- Establish credibility
- Provide emergency courses of action
- Commit to providing additional information as it becomes available



Event
(Initial)

Epidemiologist's Role

- Indirect information to:
 - The public
 - Health care workers, or
 - The public health workforce
- Communicating with at-risk personnel:
 - Speak with empathy
 - Explain risks in simple language
 - Provide risk reduction recommendations
 - Commit to continued communications and/or advise where the public can receive additional information



Event
(Maintenance)

Maintenance Phase

Communications Objectives:

- Help public understand its risks
- Provide background information
- Response and recovery plan support
- Get feedback and correct misinformation
- Explain emergency recommendations
- Empower risk and benefit decision-making



Event
(Maintenance)

Epidemiologist's Role

- Provide epidemiologic information
- Review communications and materials for scientific accuracy
- Provide the scientific facts
- Provide response and recovery information



Post-Event
(Resolution)

Resolution Phase

Communications Objectives:

- Improve public response
- Examine problems, then reinforce successes
- Persuade to support public policy and resource allocation
- Promote organization's activities and capabilities



Post-Event
(Resolution)

Epidemiologist's Role

- Review events and activities
- Provide feedback for revisions to plan
- Provide input on how to improve the public's response

NOTE: Promote the epidemiologic activities conducted to support epidemiologic capacity development during emergency events



Post-Event
(Evaluation)

Evaluation Phase

Objectives

- Evaluate performance of the original communication plan
- Document lessons learned
- Determine actions to improve crisis plan



Post-Event
(Evaluation)

Epidemiologist's Role

Address:

- Did the communications plan work?
- Were there internal communications issues?
- Were you satisfied with how the scientific information was presented to the media?
- How well was the scientific information incorporated?

Review Question #6

True or False:

The epidemiologist has a communications role during a crisis to review and provide scientific information, but does not have a role before or after a crisis has occurred.

Answer: False.

Summary

- Emergency risk communications urge behaviors or actions that allow for recovery from an emergency event
- Principles of crisis communication provide guidance for communicating with the public
- To be effective, crisis messages should be adapted to the needs, concerns and methods of communication for a specific audience
- The epidemiologist's role in crisis communications involves offering input to the crisis communications plan, communicating with specific groups as a technical expert, and evaluating communications messages

References & Resources

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References & Resources

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