



Introduction to emergency risk communication and community engagement

Definition: Risk communication refers to the exchange of real-time information, advice and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health, or to their economic or social well-being. The ultimate purpose of risk communication is to enable people to make informed decisions to protect themselves, their families and their communities. Risk communication uses many techniques ranging from media coverage and social media communication to mass communication and community engagement. It requires a sound understanding of people's perceptions, concerns and beliefs as well as their knowledge and practices. It also requires the early identification and management of rumors, misinformation and other challenges.¹

“The right message at the right time from the right person can save lives.”²

Guiding principles for crisis risk communication³

- **Be accurate:** Accuracy establishes credibility. Information can include what is known, what is not known and what is being done to fill in the gaps.
- **Be credible:** Honesty and truthfulness are invaluable during crises when trust building is key to behaviors that are self-protecting as well as protective toward communities.
- **Express empathy:** Acknowledge people's fear and concerns. Addressing how people are feeling, and the challenges they face, builds trust and rapport.
- **Provide anticipatory guidance:** This enables people to not feel blindsided and to prepare themselves emotionally and logistically, and therefore to cope better when the time comes to take action.⁴
- **Promote action:** Giving people meaningful things to do calms anxiety and promotes a sense of control.
- **Show respect:** Respectful communication is particularly important when people feel vulnerable. Respectful communication promotes cooperation.

Visit [PreventEpidemics.org](https://www.PreventEpidemics.org) for more.

Prevent Epidemics is a project of [Resolve to Save Lives](https://www.ResolveToSaveLives.org), an initiative of [Vital Strategies](https://www.VitalStrategies.org).

Communication in the initial phase of an emergency

In the early period of an emergency, the situation is characterized by confusion and intense media interest. Information is usually incomplete, and the facts are sparse. Channels of communication are often disrupted. It's important to recognize that information from the media, other organizations, and even within response organizations may not be completely accurate or consistent

During the initial phase of an emergency, good risk communication:

- Presents information that is simple, credible, accurate, consistent and delivered on time.
- Is based on the most up-to-date facts known, establishing a general understanding of the circumstances, consequences and anticipated outcomes.
- Engages community groups in the response effort (see box).
- Conveys empathy and reassurance and reduces emotional turmoil and uncertainty as much as possible. One of the best ways to limit public anxiety in a crisis is to provide useful information about the event and tell the public what they can do to help themselves, their families and their communities.
- Helps people anticipate bad news and to prepare for it.
- Promotes self-efficacy by explaining to people what actions they can take.
- Is fact-based, even while recognizing that information may be lacking. Good risk communication lets people know if something is not known; even if there is little information to offer, it still communicates what is being done to handle the crisis and conveys when more information will be available.

Principles for Community Engagement

Identify people that the community trusts and build relationships with them. Involve them in decision-making so that interventions are collaborative, contextually appropriate. Engagement through trusted community members—religious leaders, community leaders, traditional and alternative healers, teachers—becomes really important. They must be the first group to be engaged and sensitized. Community leaders and other influencers, including musicians or sports players, can also have an important function to model good behavior. Identify and engage with existing community or professional networks such as women's groups, youth groups, parents' groups, medical and private sector groups, etc.

- Is when government response agencies designate trustworthy spokespeople and channels to provide daily updates during the course of the emergency.
- Shares where and how people can get more information.

During the crisis, or “maintenance” phase of an emergency, good risk communication:

- Informs the public to help people understand ongoing risks and actions they can take to reduce risk for themselves and others.
- Explains the different risks that exist for different people, age groups, etc.
- Engages community groups in the response effort (see box).
- Encourages public support and cooperation with response and recovery efforts.
- Reinforces the need for social cohesion and unity in dealing with the crisis and reminds the public that the measures government is instituting are to protect them even if some of the measures may be difficult.
- Promotes socially responsible community behavior
- Tracks social and news media and public comments or statements, to identify rumors and misunderstandings.
- Addresses misunderstandings and rumors, and clarifies facts.
- Amplifies facts and accurate messages.

As the crisis eases and eventually ends, it is still important to continue communication and to anticipate how to prevent or respond to future crises. During this phase, good risk communication:

- Motivates people to remain vigilant.
- Counters “risk perception fatigue”—the tendency for people to relax their adherence to protective measures too quickly as the situation improves.
- Expresses empathy for those who may still be suffering or who have suffered an unrecoverable loss. People should still be consistently reminded of protective actions.
- Promotes community preparedness for possible future crises.
- Documents and shares lessons learned from the response.
- Evaluates plans for the future.

Developing risk communication messages⁵

In all phases of a crisis, it is important to follow the principles of risk communication.

For example, ask these questions:

Are messages understandable?

Avoid jargon and technical language

Are messages complete, honest and open?

- Provide facts as they are known
- Acknowledge what you don’t know
- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Acknowledge mistakes

Are messages respectful?

- About people’s health concerns?
- About their concerns for the future?
- About their concerns about fairness?

1 World Health Organization (2016) General information on risk communication. Accessed on April 4, 2020.

2 Barbara Reynolds, CDC Senior Crisis and Risk Communication Advisor

3 Excerpted from Centers for Disease Control (2018), Crisis + Emergency Risk Communications Course accessed on April 4, 2020

4 Giving People Anticipatory Guidance. 2004. By Peter M. Sandman and Jody Lanard.

5 World Health Organization (2016) Background information on risk communication, Module B1. Accessed on 4 April 2020

Resources

1. Africa CDC (2020). [Guidance on Community Social Distancing During COVID-19 Outbreak.](#)
2. CDC (2018). [Crisis + Emergency Risk Communications Course.](#)
3. USAID and PAHO (2020) [Leadership During a Pandemic: What Your Municipality Can Do.](#)
4. WHO (2018). [Communicating risk in public health emergencies: a WHO guideline for emergency risk communication \(ERC\) policy and practice.](#)
5. WHO (2020). [COVID-19 stigma guide.](#)
6. WHO (2020). [Risk communication and community engagement \(RCCE\) readiness and response to the 2019 novel coronavirus: Interim guidance.](#)
7. WHO (2018) [Risk communication and community engagement preparedness and readiness framework: Ebola response in the Democratic Republic of Congo in North Kivu.](#)
8. Peter M. Sandman and Jody Lanard (2004) [Crisis Communication I: How Bad Is It? How Sure Are You?](#)