

# Communications Basics

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## Crisis and Emergency Risk Communications

### Crisis Communications

This term is used most often to describe an organization that is facing a crisis and needs to communicate information about that crisis, as well as respond to the crisis.

The crisis is typically unexpected, may not be in the organization's control, and may cause harm to the organization's good reputation or viability, employees or patients, or significantly disrupt the organization's ability to provide healthcare services. Also, the organization is likely to face some legal or moral responsibility for the crisis (or at least its response to the crisis), i.e., the organization will be judged on its response to the crisis.

Examples of the types of crisis a Public Health Department must be ready to handle include:

- **Workplace incidents:** employee/ personnel issues; workplace violence, etc.
- **Issue regarding senior management/staff:** arrests; sexual harassment, etc.
- **Political and/or legal actions:** lawsuits, public protests, negative news story.

### Emergency Risk Communications

Different from crisis communication in that organization is not perceived as a participant in the disaster, except as having a role to resolve the situation. This type of communications provides the risks and benefits (provides information) to allow the audience to make the best possible decisions about their well-being.

The emergency happens with nearly impossible time constraints and people will have to decide within the parameters of imperfect choices during the event. Decisions are typically made with narrow time constraints, decisions may need to be made with imperfect or incomplete information and decisions may be irreversible. Emergency risk communication provides expert opinions in the hope that it benefits the audience and advances a behavior or action that allows for rapid and efficient recovery from the event.

Examples of the types of emergencies that Public Health would have to respond to:

- **Natural or man-made disasters:** disease outbreaks, floods, fires, earthquakes bomb or terrorist attacks.
- **Environmental/Safety related incidents:** chemical spills, mass casualties & fatalities incidents, fires, explosions, and other accidents

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Communicating during an emergency is different. There are a number of communication failures that can dampen success. Things to avoid include mixed messages from multiple experts, information being released late, paternalistic attitude, not countering rumors and myths in real time, and displays of public power struggles that can cause confusion. The key to successful communications is to be first, be right, and be credible.

## **In a serious crisis, all affected people**

- Take in information differently
- Process Information Differently
- Act on Information Differently

## **Decision making in a crisis is different**

- People Simplify
- Cling to current beliefs
- Remember what we see or previously experience
- People limit intake of new information (3-7 bits)

## **Four basic elements to establishing trust and credibility:**

- Expressing empathy and caring
- Showing competence and expertise
- Remaining honest and open
- Being committed

## **What do people feel when disaster looms?**

- Denial
- Fear, anxiety, confusion, dread
- Hopelessness or helplessness
- Seldom panic
- Vicarious rehearsal

## **What does the public need?**

- To feel empowered- Reduce fear and victimization
- Mental preparation reduces anxiety
- Taking action reduces anxiety
- Uncertainty must be addressed

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## Communicating with the Media

The media's role is a crucial in helping get your message out quickly during a serious crisis. By being responsive to the media, you can provide timely and accurate information to help guide the public's response and potentially minimize further injury or save lives.

### **Timeliness is of the Essence.**

In emergency, crisis or risk situations, gather accurate information (What happened? When? Where? Who is involved/affected?), and get that information out to the media as quickly as possible. However, do not feel so pressured to get the information out so fast that you jeopardize accuracy. It is always best to update the media – rather than correct or retract statements -- as information becomes available.

### **Know Your Message.**

Determine what you can and cannot say and obtain appropriate approvals. All public statements should contain a message in emergency, crisis and risk situations, and clearly communicate that message. Additionally, when addressing media questions, it is always advisable to come back to your message.

When answering reporter's questions, "**A.T.M.**":

**Answer** the question directly – It is OK to even repeat the question as part of your answer.

**Transition** – Use some "bridge" or transitional language to get back to your message. Phrases such as "Let me go back to what a said a few moments ago," "What I want to say is," or "It is important for you to know that" are good transitions to your message.

**Message** – Repeat your message. It's OK to repeat it up to three times in your communication with the media. Return to your message before you've fully answered the question – no matter what question you're asked.

### **Keep it Short & Simple or "K.I.S.S."**

Be brief, specific and credible. For on camera and radio interviews, think ahead of "soundbites" that communicate accurate information, as well as your message – such "soundbites" should be no more than 30 seconds.

### **Avoid Using Acronyms, Jargon and/or Overly Technical Language.**

In dealing with emergency, crisis or risk situations, it is often easy to slip into "technical speak," and use terms, word or acronyms that the media, and more importantly, the public do not know or understand. If it is necessary to use such terms (it's often simpler), always define the term when first used in any communication.

### **Everything is "On the Record."**

Especially in a crisis. "On the record" is media relations jargon – it means that what you say can be quoted in print, aired on TV or broadcast on the radio. Be extremely thoughtful about what you say and when you say it. Do not assume that anything is off the record, even if you say so.

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## **Tell the Truth. Do Not Guess or Speculate. Never Lie.**

If you do not know the answer to a question, it is OK to tell reporters that you don't know. You can let them know that you'll back to them with information.

## **The Media Has A Job to Do.**

While the media sometimes perceived as being too inquisitive, aggressive or even sensational, it is important to remember they, just like you, have a job to do. Their job is to provide information to the public in a timely and accurate manner. Providing reporters with accurate and timely information helps them do their job, and it also helps you meet your goal too. Ultimately, as communicators and public information officers, we have the same interest as the media. However, do not assume reporters are your friends. And, do not get angry or argumentative with them if they are misinformed or rude. Keep your cool. If you do not understand a reporter's question, ask him or her to repeat it or ask it another way.

## **Anticipate Questions, Think About Your Answers.**

Remember to "A.T.M."

## **Never Say "No Comment."**

If you are not able to answer a question, say, "I am not going to answer that question," "I am not authorized to answer the question," or better yet, "Let me get back to you on that question."

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## Delivering Your Message

### **How You Look and Sound is Often As Important as What You Say.**

As public information officers in an emergency, crisis or risk situation, it is very important to be calm, credible and assertive. Most often in these situations, the media is looking to you as an authority or expert. Remember to check your appearance, maintain steady eye contact and use an even tone of voice. Communicating empathy and compassion in both words and body language is critical in emergencies and crises.

### **Location**

During an emergency, interviews may take place outside an emergency site/scene or in a conference/briefing room, or maybe even in a television studio.

- **Inside venues:**  
Set up the environment with things like identifying or “official” signs, banners and flags.  
Remove any inappropriate or distracting background items
- **Outside venues:**  
Be aware of back drops, wind and reflections from windows or other distractions.

### **Physical Appearance**

Think about what’s appropriate for the setting when selecting your clothing – professional, perhaps conservative is best, but not always -- make it simple and understated.

- For men, suits and ties may look inappropriate or even “out of touch” at the scene/site of an emergency
- Ditto for women -- business suits, fancy dresses and high heels may be out of place.
- Wear any identifying or “official” clothing/badges relevant/appropriate to your job.
  - Look professional unless it’s an interview related to a site or program outcome
  - Gaudy sport coats/ trendy dresses will probably distract from the content of your answers
  - Shiny and/or complex clothing patterns will show badly and detract from your message
- For television, avoid shiny jewelry and bold, dangling earrings. Avoid white shirts/blouses- light blue is best. This is still true even with recent refinements in camera technology.

### **Body Language**

When standing:

- Stand straight and steady – Be comfortable and “natural,” but avoid slouching, shrugging and shifting
- Look at the reporter. With TV crews, avoid looking into the camera and/or monitor.
- Avoid tilting your head away from the reporter - it suggests discomfort, uncertainty or deception
- Let your arms hang comfortably at your side, or fold them in front of or behind you. Gesturing mildly with your hands is appropriate, but keep your gestures “tight” to your body. Think of your body as a “box” – gestures should stay “inside the box” of your upper torso... below your head/chest and above your waist, no wider or broader than your torso itself.

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When sitting:

- Sit with your back straight
- Lean slightly forward - it presents a positive, comfortable look; leaning back in your chair can make you appear cocky or too carefree
- Keep knees close together or crossed neatly
- Keep hands in on the table/desk or in your lap, except when you gesture, then put them back
- For men in suits/sports coats, tuck and sit the bottom of your jacket – this will keep the coat from bunching or creeping up around your neck.