



Psychology of a Crisis

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Module Summary

- Common negative feelings and behaviors for people during a crisis
- How communication differs in a crisis
- Risk communication principles for emergencies

Psychology of a Crisis

Common human emotions—
left without mitigating response—
may lead to negative behaviors
that hamper recovery or cause
more harm.

Negative Behaviors

- Demands for unneeded treatment
- Reliance on special relationships
- Unreasonable trade and travel restrictions
- MUPS—Multiple Unexplained Physical Symptoms

What Do People Feel Inside When a Disaster Occurs or Looms?

- Denial
- Fear and avoidance
- Hopelessness or helplessness
- Vicarious rehearsal
- Seldom panic

What Is Vicarious Rehearsal?

- The communication age gives national audiences the experience of local crises. These armchair victims mentally rehearse recommended courses of actions.
- Recommendations are easier to reject the farther removed the audience is from real threat.
- The worried well can heavily tax response and recovery.

What's Different During a Crisis?

Communicating in a Crisis Is Different

When in “fight or flight” moments of an emergency,
more information leads to decreased anxiety.

Decisionmaking in a Crisis Is Different

- People simplify
- Cling to current beliefs
- We remember what we see or previously experience (first messages carry more weight)

So How Do We Initially Communicate in a Crisis?

Simply

Timely

Accurately

Repeatedly

Credibly

Consistently

How Do We Communicate About Risk in an Emergency?

All risks are not accepted equally

- Voluntary vs. involuntary
- Controlled personally vs. controlled by others
- Familiar vs. exotic
- Natural vs. manmade
- Reversible vs. permanent
- Statistical vs. anecdotal
- Fairly vs. unfairly distributed
- Affecting children vs. affecting adults



Be Careful With Risk Comparisons

- Are they similarly accepted based on
 - high/low hazard
 - high/low outrage

A. High hazard	B. High outrage
C. Low hazard	D. Low outrage

- Give examples
- Cornerstone of risk acceptance



Risk Acceptance Examples

- Dying by falling coconut or dying by shark
 - Natural vs. manmade
 - Fairly vs. unfairly distributed
 - Familiar vs. exotic
 - Controlled by self vs. outside control of self

Risk Communication Principles for Emergencies

Don't overreassure

- Considered controversial by some.
- A high estimate of harm modified downward is much more acceptable to the public than a low estimate of harm modified upward.



Risk Communication Principles for Emergencies

**State continued concern before stating
reassuring updates**

“Although we’re not out of the woods yet, we have seen a declining number of cases each day this week.”



Risk Communication Principles for Emergencies

Confidence vs. uncertainty

Instead of making promises about outcomes, express the uncertainty of the situation and a confident belief in the “process” to fix the problem and address public safety concerns.



Risk Communication Principles for Emergencies

Give people things to do - Anxiety is reduced by action and a restored sense of control

- Symbolic behaviors (e.g., going to a candlelight vigil)
- Preparatory behaviors (e.g., buying water and batteries)
- Contingent “if, then” behaviors (e.g., creating an emergency family communication plan)



Risk Communication Principles for Emergencies

Give people things to do - Anxiety is reduced by action and a restored sense of control

- Single most important action for self-protection
- Recommend a 3-part action plan
 - You must do X
 - You should do Y
 - You can do Z



Risk Communication Principles for Emergencies

Allow people the right to feel fear

- Don't pretend they're not afraid, and don't tell them they shouldn't be.
- Acknowledge the fear, and give contextual information.

