Psychology of a Crisis
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

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Be Careful With Risk Comparisons

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. High hazard</th>
<th>B. High outrage</th>
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<td>C. Low hazard</td>
<td>D. Low outrage</td>
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- 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.
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.