

LEADERS' GUIDE TO RISK COMMUNICATION IN THE FACE OF EMERGING PUBLIC HEALTH THREATS

Emerging public health threats, such as infectious disease outbreaks, creates many psychological stressors. Some are known and understood, allowing for preparation and training. As these events evolve, novel mechanisms of injury and harm increase fear and uncertainty and can significantly diminish community wellbeing.

Community members can be best prepared through timely, accurate, and updated public health education information, which is best delivered using effective, ongoing risk communication. Risk communication is a critical tool for optimizing the psychological and behavioral response of

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an organization or community. For healthcare and community leaders, risk communication involves sharing information about risks, the significance and meaning of those risks, as well as decisions, actions, or policies aimed at managing the risks. Effective risk communication builds trust and collaboration,

reduces stress, and allows community members to better focus on performing their roles at home and work. Leaders can enhance the ability of community members to manage the unique psychological stressors of emerging public health threats through the following:

- Utilize effective risk communication principles, including provide information on a regular and timely basis, share what is known about the threat, avoid speculation, always be truthful, avoid false promises, provide updated information when available, and anticipate the need to repeat messages.
- Provide health education and resources that enable community members to take basic steps to prepare at home and in the workplace for new and emerging threats; this will enhance self- and community-efficacy and reduce fears.
- Encourage families and community members to work together on planning and preparing, so they can understand risks and share accurate information that provides reassurance and reduces uncertainty.
- Provide a mechanism for people to share concerns about new and emerging threats and get questions answered; the use of an 800-number information line and online resources, shared broadly and repeatedly, can reduce distress and empower community members to engage in self-care behaviors.
- Deliver education on risk communication as part of leadership training at all levels. Provide community leaders with tools and information on the current status of emerging public health threats and resources to assist with effective communication.
- Educate family members on the potential adverse effects of continuous or ongoing exposure to media coverage of the emerging threat, which increases stress, particularly for children.
- Anticipate that distress over new threats presents a particular challenge to individuals who have not previously experienced them; targeted messaging and education may enhance wellbeing for these individuals.

Additional Resources

Leadership Communication: Anticipating and Responding to Stressful Events. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress.

https://www.cstsonline.org/assets/media/documents/CSTS_FS_Leadership_Communication_Anticipating_Responding_to_Stressful_Events.pdf