

Introduction

The best way to navigate high-stress situations is to prepare in advance, though some emergencies are hard to predict. As you put plans in place, keep in mind the following tips for streamlining your process and making your communication more effective.

Source: <http://www.nwcp.org/communications/news/six-tips-for-better-crisis-and-emergency-communications>

1. Create a chain of command

First and foremost, you need to make sure that your staff knows their communications role in an emergency. Under normal conditions, you may prefer an organizational structure that focuses less on hierarchy and more on group work, but that system needs to be modified in a crisis situation. This is especially true for creating, approving, and implementing communications. For instance, a receptionist contacted by the media should direct all calls to a specific person on the communications staff, but that same person may be asked to write press releases..


2. Identify all audiences

Quickly gather all of the information about the people affected by this event or situation, including people within geographic areas, specific communities, and people living under different conditions. As with many health issues, crisis situations adversely affect some populations more than others. These populations include, but are not limited to, non-English-speaking groups, those with mental illness, the elderly, the Blind and Deaf communities, and immigrants. Identify the vulnerable populations in your jurisdiction and understand that they might require different messages or different media for communicating those messages..

3. Pre-test messages, when possible

It's hard to perfectly anticipate a crisis situation, but try your best to plan ahead for more predictable circumstances, like the flu or an earthquake. Create messages about these events before they happen, and test them with different populations. Then, if the worst happens, you won't have to guess what to say.

Crisis Emotions

Vicarious rehearsal	armchair victimization	emotional	physical
Denial	refusal to take good advice		
Stigmatization	isolation of group		
Fear and avoidance	irrational behavior		
Withdrawal, hopelessness, helplessness	paralysis	cognitive	interpersonal

The chart above is from the CDC's guide to Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication. In the left column, it displays stresses common among people affected by a crisis situation, and the next column lists manifestations of those emotions. In the far right column you can also see the way those manifestations are characterized and how certain factors reinforce each other.

4. Recruit liaisons

Collaborate with community leaders within your various populations to help facilitate communications during a crisis and to test your messages. These people may serve as interpreters, translators, and cultural navigators, and they will make your communications team more robust. More importantly, they will help you build trust.

5. Be on time

When it comes to information in a crisis situation, the public expects you to be first, right, and credible. Sometimes this is possible, but not always. When you feel confident in your information, you can use social media or text messaging to communicate quickly. Keep in mind, however, that people who use social media and text messaging will try to respond and ask more questions, and they will demand their answers immediately. If you plan to use either of these methods, it is best to have someone dedicated to responding to these requests in a timely manner..

6. Prepare for the media

You or someone on your staff will be responsible for coordinating information with the media. You will need to respond to questions, write press releases, and make sure your messages are appropriate and accurate. This can be challenging, especially when it all has to be done in a short amount of time. The CDC has compiled a list of templates that will help you anticipate the needs of the media and other groups who may need your attention.