

# Introduction to Risk Communication for Emergency Preparedness and Response



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Emergency Preparedness & Response Course  
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# Session Objectives

## **Understand basic concepts about:**

1. Communication and crises
2. Health literacy and clear communication
3. Risk communication
4. Organizational strategies to improve risk communication

# "There Is No Flu Vaccine Crisis!"

[\(CNN - Oct 18, 2004\)](#) -- The shortage of flu vaccine in the United States is "not a health crisis," a spokesman for Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said, urging people to be patient as the government works to reallocate the nation's limited number of vaccines.

"I would like to tell individuals just be calm and don't stand in line, because we have approximately 24 million doses of vaccine that have not been shipped yet."

# Waiting for Flu Vaccine



# **Bad Communication Adds to Crisis**

- **Late information “overcome by events”**
- **Over-reassuring messages**
- **No reality check on recommendations**
- **Myths, rumors, doomsayers not countered**
- **Improper modeling of behavior, lack of affect, bad humor by spokesperson/leader**
- **Public power struggles and confusion**

(Barbara Reynolds, CDC)

# Good Communication can...

- **Reduce public's exposure to risk**
- **Mobilize coordinated responses among health & safety workers**
- **Improve public's response to crises**

# Health Literacy

# What is Health Literacy?



The ability to access, read,  
understand and act on health  
information

## What is it like?

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# How well do US adults read and write?



# NAAL Findings 2003



 Below Basic     Basic     Intermediate     Proficient

# US Reading Levels Compared to Health Information Readability

- The average American reads at the 7th-8th grade level--3 to 4 grades below last grade completed.
- 20% read below the 5th grade level
- Most health information is written at the 10-12th grade level.

# **“Clear Health Communication” Tips**

**Involve users as co-designers!**

- Use photos**
- Write information at appropriate user level**
- Put info in small “chunks”**
- Focus on behavior rather than facts**
- Make information culturally sensitive**

# **Risk Communication**

# **Risk Communication**

**“A Science-based Approach for Communicating Effectively in:**

- ➡ High-Concern, High Stress**
- ➡ Emotionally Charged, or**
- ➡ Controversial Situations”**

**(Vincent Covello)**

# Risk Communication

**“An interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions; often involves multiple messages about the nature of risk or expressing concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management. ”**

(US DHHS “Communicating in a Crisis,” 2002)

# Origins of Risk Communication

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- ◆ **Developed over past 30 years**
- ◆ **Part of risk management process**
- ◆ **Based on psychological models of risk perception and communication**
- ◆ **Moving from “expert” to “participatory” approaches: “power sharing”**

# Types of Public Health Crises

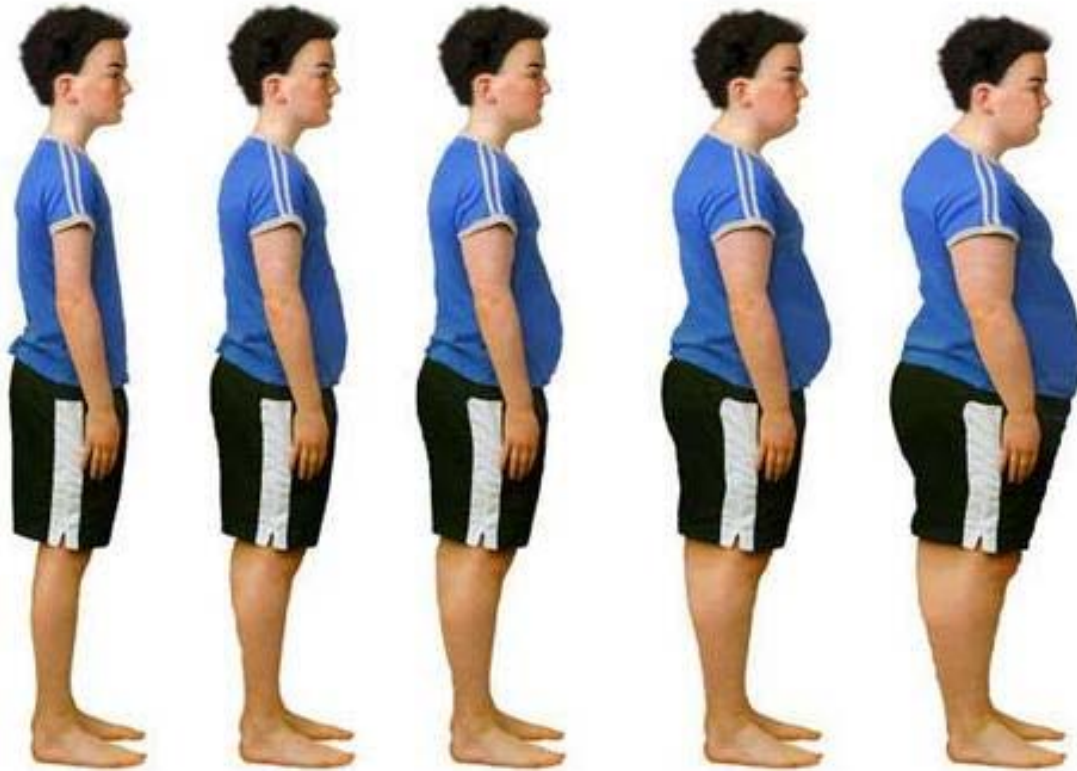
- **Catastrophic natural environmental disasters (e.g., hurricane, floods, earthquake)**
- **Infectious disease outbreaks (SARS, pandemic influenza, unknown)**
- **WMD (bombings, chemical, nuclear)**
- **Bioterrorism (smallpox, anthrax)**
- **“Epidemics” of chronic disease (obesity, cancer)**

# Hurricane Katrina Emergency



AP / Eric Gay

# Our Biggest Health Crisis: Obesity



# Increasing Disaster Risk

- ✓ **Increasing population density**
- ✓ **Increased settlement in high-risks areas**
- ✓ **Increased technological hazards and dependency**
- ✓ **Increased terrorism: biological, chemical, nuclear?**
- ✓ **Aging U.S. population**
- ✓ **Emerging infectious diseases (AMR)**
- ✓ **International travel (global village)**

(Barbara Reynolds, CDC)

# How People Perceive Risk

## Lower Perceived Risk

1. Trustworthy sources
2. Substantial benefits
3. Voluntary
4. Controllable
5. Fair/equitable
6. Natural origin
7. Familiar
8. Not dreaded
9. Certain
10. Children not as victims

## Higher Perceived Risk

- Untrustworthy sources
- Few benefits
- Involuntary
- Not controllable
- Unfair/inequitable
- Human origin (man made)
- Unfamiliar/exotic
- Dreaded
- Uncertain
- Children as victims

# Psychology Before a Crisis

- **A disaster will not happen . . .**
- **A disaster will not happen to me . . .**
- **A disaster will not be that bad . . .**
- **If it happens and it is that bad, there is nothing I can do about it**

(Barbara Reynolds, CDC)

# Psychology in a Crisis

- **Vicarious rehearsal**
- **Denial**
- **Stigmatization**
- **Fear and avoidance**
- **Withdrawal and feelings of hopelessness**
- **Heightened anxiety, public confusion and stress**

(Barbara Reynolds, CDC)

# **“MENTAL NOISE” THEORY**

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**People who are stressed have difficulty:**

- Hearing information**
- Understanding information**
- Remembering**

**(Vincent Covello)**

# **MENTAL NOISE THEORY→**

## **VERBAL MESSAGES:**

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- **Limited attention span**
- **Limited content - 3 messages**
- **Clear - 6th grade**
- **Tell people what to do**

(Vincent Covello)

# **“TRUST DETERMINATION” THEORY**

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**People who are stressed or upset often distrust that others are:**

- Listening, caring, empathetic**
- Honest, open**
- Competent, expert**

**(Vincent Covello)**

# Seeking Trust After Hurricane Katrina



**In High Concern Situations, People Want to  
Know that You Care Before They Care What  
You Know**

(Vincent Covello)

**Communication should be:**

**50% Listening/caring/empathy**

**--Within the first 9-30 seconds**

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# **Organizational Strategies to Improve Risk Communication**

# Planning Risk Communication

- 1. Assess health department expertise & resources**
- 2. Identify a risk communication/media advisor**
- 3. Define risk communication goals & action steps**
- 4. Train spokespeople and staff**
- 5. Identify key audiences and form partnerships**
- 6. Develop and test messages/communication**
- 7. Continuously evaluate and improve**

# **Crisis/Risk Communication course for state/local/federal**

- **Interactive CD-Rom “certification” course**
- **Comprehensive emergency risk communication tool**
- **Plan, prepare and train in advance**
- **Provide tools during an emergency to guide the public information response according to the type of emergency**

# **CDC Training**

- **Pre-event, Event and Post-event Communication Planning**
- **Psychology and use of Risk Communication Principles in a Crisis**
- **Working with the Media in a Crisis**
- **Spokesperson Trust and Credibility in an Emergency**
- **Crisis Communication Plans and the 9 Steps of Response**
- **Media and Public Health law**
- **Messages and Audiences Needs in a Crisis**
- **Bioterrorism and Emergency Risk Communication**
- **Meeting Partner and Stakeholders Needs**
- **Roles and Responsibilities in the Official Response**
- **Human Resource Management for Communicators in a Crisis**

# Risk Communication Resources

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- ◆ CDC Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Courses: [www.cdc.gov/communication](http://www.cdc.gov/communication)
- ◆ Academic Centers of Public Health Preparedness: [www.phppo.cdc.gov](http://www.phppo.cdc.gov)
- ◆ Association of State and Territorial Health Officials: [www.astho.org](http://www.astho.org)
- ◆ National Association of County and City Health Officials: [www.naccho.org](http://www.naccho.org)

**“The main problem with  
communication  
is the assumption that it has  
occurred.”**

***-George Bernard Shaw***

# Thanks



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UCHealthAction.org