Using the Psychological Science of Crisis Leadership and Communications to Navigate the Coronavirus: A Webinar for Public Officials

PRESENTERS
Baruch Fischhoff, PhD, Ellen Peters, PhD, and Roxane Cohen Silver, PhD

MODERATORS
Sandra L. Shullman, PhD, and Arthur C. Evans Jr., PhD

MARCH 20, 2020
Welcome

**PRESENTERS**
Dr. Ellen Peters  
Dr. Baruch Fischhoff  
Dr. Roxane Cohen Silver

**MODERATORS**
Dr. Sandra Shullman and Dr. Arthur Evans

**MARCH 20, 2020**
The Current Crisis – COVID-19

- Invisible enemy
- Unknown duration
- Widespread impact
- Unprecedented (no blueprint)
Showing up as a Leader

- Know yourself and be mindful of your shortcomings
- Practice empathy and understanding
- Surround yourself with diverse perspectives to promote learning

- Stay focused on the ‘critical few’
What is Most Important?

- Understanding perceptions of risk and accurately communicating in a time of crisis
- Fulfilling your duty to inform in times of uncertainty
- Promoting healthy coping and resilience
Understanding Risk Perceptions and How to Communicate

Ellen Peters, PhD
Philip H. Knight Chair
Director, Center for Science Communication Research (SCR)
University of Oregon

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People use their emotions

1. To assess risk
2. To motivate action
3. To guide their thinking
1. More fear = I’m at higher risk
2. More fear = more actions

3. More fear = more thinking about the negatives
Evidence-based information presentation matters

- Especially when cognitive abilities are lower
  - Lower literacy or numeracy
  - Highly emotional
  - Stress
  - Cognitive load
What communicators should do

1. Identify communication goals
   Then choose strategically how to present information

2. Reduce cognitive effort

3. Provide numbers
   - To correct misperceptions
   - To provide a more complete perspective
What communicators should do

4. Show images of people doing recommended
5. Let them know this can be stopped and what they can do (and what you’re doing)
6. Test communications
- The science of communication exists and should be used.
  - Understand your audience
  - How information is presented influences how it is understood and used
  - Present information strategically
Thank you!

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Fulfilling the Duty to Inform

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CMU.EDU/EPP/PEOPLE/FACULTY/BARUCH-FISCHOFF.HTML

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People Face Stressful Decisions

- Making ends meet
- Doing their jobs safely
- Taking care of loved ones at home
- Taking care of loved ones remotely
- Finding food, supplies, and medications
- Supporting the vulnerable in their community

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The evidence that people see may not be representative, or recognized as such.

Generally useful mental models may lead people astray.

Experts may use jargon, vague terms ("soon," "likely"), not reveal the limits to their knowledge.

Public officials may ignore people’s problems, misunderstand or spin the facts, contradict one another, contradict themselves.

Their Information Sources are Imperfect.
- Emotions can both cloud and focus thinking.
- Poor communications can needlessly increase anxiety.
- Ignoring people’s problems can undermine their trust in experts and public officials.
- People may strengthen social ties, when institutions fail them.
- The constituent **cognitive**, **emotional**, and **social** processes have been studied for many years.
Risk Communication at NASEM

Risk Communication at NASEM

http://www.nap.edu/catalog/6034/
http://www.nap.edu/catalog/21666/
https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24738
http://www.nap.edu/catalog/18870/
Science of Science Communication

PNAS, 116 (16), 7670-7675.
www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1805863115
A Guide to Timely, Inexpensive, Scientifically Grounded Communication

http://www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/ReportsManualsForms/Reports/ucm268078.htm
Each Chapter

<3000 WORDS

- Summarizes the science
- Provides practical implications
- Shows how to evaluate draft communications
  - for no resources at all
  - for minimal resources
  - for resources commensurate with the stakes riding on the communication
Content Design Process

- **Analysis** — What specific decisions do people face?
- **Description** — How do they make them intuitively?
- **Intervention** — How can we help them to do better?
- **Evaluation** — Are our current efforts good enough?

*Repeat, as necessary.*
Some Applications

- Radon
- pre-term birth
- pharmaceuticals
- climate change
- phishing
- breast cancer
- nuclear incidents
- tornadoes
- xenotransplantation
- smart meters
- HIV/AIDS

- sexual assault
- intelligence analysis
- EMF
- avian flu
- palliative care
- breast implants
- nuclear energy in space
- Plan B (morning after pill)
- small modular reactors
- vaccines (anthrax, MMR)
- Critical care medicine

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Applying the Science Requires

- A **network** with needed substantive expertise, to get the facts right

- Ties with **community leaders** to identify needs, and get the right facts

- A **process** for rapid message testing

- A **strategic commitment** to risk communication
A Strategic Communication Process

Coping with Anxiety during a Pandemic: How to Ensure Population Resilience

Roxane Cohen Silver, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Psychological Science
Department of Medicine
Program in Public Health
University of California, Irvine

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The Unique Case of COVID-19

- Invisible threat (who is infected?)
- Ambiguous threat (how bad will this get?)
- Uncertain future (how long will this last?)
- Need to use “social distancing” conflicts with natural desire to connect with friends/family during stressful times
The Unique Case of COVID-19

- Acknowledge that:
  - Uncertainty is stressful
  - Anxiety is appropriate
- Tell the truth: The situation may get worse before it gets better
  - But if we work together, we can save lives
- Minimizing the uncertainty is disingenuous
The Media: A Double-Edged Sword

- People seek trusted information via the media
- Rumors and misinformation appear on social media (not vetted for accuracy)
- Overexposure to media can amplify stress, with downstream health effects
- Enlist media as allies, not adversaries
- Conflicting political agendas and contradictory messages
- Fostering community conflict
- Insincerity from one’s leaders
Maximizing Community Resilience

- Enlist community support via strong social institutions (e.g., faith-based alliances)
- Promote shared values and community solidarity
- Bolster confidence in trustworthy authorities (e.g., health professionals fighting the disease on the front lines)
Maximizing Community Resilience

- Recognize that anxiety is contagious, but so is compassion.

- Encourage positive community outcomes (e.g., altruistic behavior, social cohesion, volunteerism)
For further information

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QUESTIONS?
RESOURCES

How leaders can maximize trust and minimize stress during the COVID-19 pandemic
ON.APA.ORG/COVID-19-LEADERSHIP

Seven crucial research findings that can help people deal with COVID-19
ON.APA.ORG/7-FINDINGS-COVID19
THANK YOU.

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