

Crisis Communication II: Coping with the Emotional Side of the Crisis

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8. *Don't overdiagnose or overplan for panic.* Panic is a relatively rare (though extremely damaging) response to crisis. Efforts to avoid panic – for example, by withholding bad news and making over-reassuring statements – can actually make panic likelier instead. Officials need to rethink their tendency to imagine that people are panicking or about to panic when they are merely worrying ... or perhaps disobeying or distrusting you.

9. *Don't aim for zero fear.* People are right to feel fearful in a crisis. A fearless public that leaves you alone to manage the problem is not achievable. Nor is it desirable; vigilance and precaution-taking depend on sufficient fear. Humans, moreover, are hard-wired to experience and tolerate fear, often becoming less fearful of one object as we become more fearful of another. The extremes of apathy, panic, terror, and denial are all harmful, but in a crisis proportionate fear is not a problem; it is part of the solution.

10. *Don't forget emotions other than fear.* When people are faced with a crisis, the “fear family” is only one possible set of responses. The empathy/misery/depression family” is also extremely common, and deserving of the crisis manager’s attention. Among the other responses: anger, hurt, and guilt. These emotional reactions to crisis are all normal, in emergency responders as well as in the public. But resilience is also normal; most people can cope.

11. *Don't ridicule the public's emotions.* Expressions of contempt for people’s fears and other emotions almost always backfire. Terms to avoid include “panic,” “hysteria,” and “irrational.” Even when they are accurate, these labels do not help and usually they are not accurate. Even when discouraging harmful behavior, such as stigmatization, it is important to do so with sympathy rather than ridicule. If you are frustrated with the public, express your frustration privately, so it doesn't leak out unless you want it to.

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12. *Legitimize people's fears.* Instead of leaving people alone with their fears, help them bear their fears by legitimizing them, and even sharing some of your own. Even technically inaccurate fears can be legitimized as natural, understandable, and widespread: "Despite the evidence that the health risk is very small, even I felt a little nervous this morning when I heard someone coughing on the bus."

13. *Tolerate early over-reactions.* One of the main ways people absorb new risks is by "over-reacting" at first. We stop doing things that suddenly seem dangerous; we become hyper-vigilant about the news and maybe even strangers on the street; we personalize the risk and take precautions that are unnecessary or premature. Psychiatrists call this an "adjustment reaction." It is a useful form of rehearsal, emotional and logistical, and it should be tolerated – if handled well by officials it is the teachable moment. People will settle soon enough into the New Normal.

14. *Establish your own humanity.* Professionals are understandably preoccupied with looking professional. But especially in a crisis, the best leaders reveal their humanity. Express your feelings about the crisis and show that you can bear them; that will help the rest of us bear our own feelings, and help us build a stronger alliance with you. Express your wishes and hopes as well. Tell a few stories about your past, your family, what you and your officemate said to each other this morning about the crisis.

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