Behavioral Health Messages
Related to Disasters & other Public Health Emergencies

Building trust and conveying messages of hope and recovery are critical to the emotional well being of persons affected by disasters and other public health emergencies.

This document contains several pre-developed messages that spokespeople can use for different events. Spokespeople should practice delivering the three key messages, then work their way through the supporting points when needed. These messages were developed by Nebraska’s Behavioral Health Risk Communication Cadre – professionals with special expertise and knowledge of risk communication and threat assessment. The group meets monthly to discuss emergency plans and information related to behavioral health.

How to use this guide:

The behavioral health guidelines for risk communication (on page 3) serve as broad guiding principles for public officials as they communicate with the public.

This is followed by a series of questions related to psychological or emotional aspects of disasters that are commonly asked by media and by people affected by the event. Each question has an answer composed of three key messages and a set of three supporting statements for each key message. The message and supporting statements have been very carefully designed and ordered to help the spokesperson communicate this important information effectively using easy to understand language, short sentences, and other proven risk communication techniques. Sometimes the questions asked of the spokesperson are not exactly like the ones we have anticipated, so general topic areas are also listed to help the spokesperson choose a set of key messages.

A set of fact sheets are located at the back of this packet. These can be used in conjunction with the key messages or form the basis of printed material that can be distributed as needed.
## Table of Contents

Behavioral Health Guidelines for Risk Communication ............................................ 3
What should we tell children about the disaster? .................................................. 4
How will children react to this disaster? ............................................................. 5
What affect will media coverage of this event have on our children? ................. 6
What should we be doing now (special populations)? ........................................ 7
What can we do to cope with this situation? ....................................................... 8
How do we cope with “Cabin Fever?” ............................................................... 8
What can people do to feel less anxious about a pandemic? .............................. 10
How do we deal with strong emotions? .............................................................. 11
How are people affected by such a major loss? ................................................... 12
Fact Sheets ........................................................................................................ 13
After the disaster ................................................................................................. 14
Children’s reaction to the disaster ...................................................................... 15
How to talk to children after the disaster ........................................................... 16
Talking to Children about Death ......................................................................... 17
Common Stress and Emotional Reactions after the Disaster ............................. 18
Exercise Participant Information Sheet: Stress .................................................. 19
Post Disaster tips for People with Physical Disabilities ...................................... 20
Special concerns of older adults following a disaster ......................................... 21
Disaster and the Adult with a Serious Mental Illness .......................................... 22
Behavioral Health Guidelines for Risk Communication

BE FIRST. BE RIGHT. BE CREDIBLE.
BE EMPATHETIC.

Building trust and conveying messages of hope and recovery is critical to the emotional well-being of persons affected by the disaster and the general public. The public's emotional well-being is affected by the messages you deliver.

Your messages should:
- Begin with a statement of empathy.
- Provide reassurance through fact-based information.
- Counter rumors.
- Encourage safe, adaptive and cooperative behavior.
- Promote self-care strategies for stress management.
- Emphasize resilience.

During a period of uncertainty and unconfirmed threat, communication should:
- Reassure
- Foster Confidence & Coping
- Promote Preparedness

During an event communication should:
- Reassure
- Foster Confidence & Coping
- Empower
- Encourage People to Reconnect

During recovery communication should:
- Foster Resilience
- Empower
- Encourage Community Cohesion
- Commemorate

Reference:
Missouri Department of Mental Health Office of Disaster Readiness. (2006) Disaster Communications Guidebook - Communicating in a crisis: Promoting trust, cooperation, & emotional well-being through risk communication. U.S.


What should we tell children about the disaster?

Topic: Telling children about the event

Key Message #1:
1) The age of the child should guide how much and the type of information you share about the disaster.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) Give information at a level the child can understand.
   b) Give younger children fewer details about the disaster.
   c) Children of all ages need comfort and attention from the adults in their lives after events like this.

Key Message #2:
2) Be honest when talking to children.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) Give children just enough information to answer their questions.
   b) Sometimes being honest means admitting you don’t know the answer.
   c) Tell children there are people working to make them safe.

Key Message #3:
3) Listen to the child’s questions and answer them.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) Let children know it’s ok to talk about how they feel.
   b) Some children may ask the same question over and over.
   c) Let children ask questions freely and give simple answers.

Reference:


How will children react to this disaster?

Topic: Children's reactions

Key Message #1:
1) Adults and children have a variety of reactions after disasters.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) Children may be scared, worried, upset, have sleep problems, or feel sick.
   b) Children might act younger than their age.
   c) Everyone reacts to disasters in their own way.

Key Message #2:
2) Some children may need additional support.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) Talk to a professional if you’re concerned about a child’s reaction.
   b) Seeking help doesn’t mean that you’ve failed.
   c) People often find it helpful to talk with a professional.

Key Message #3:
3) Most children will be fine with support from family and friends.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) Children feel more secure with structure and routine.
   b) Children learn from adults how to react to the disaster.
   c) Most children will feel safe again over time.

Reference:


What affect will media coverage of this event have on our children?

Topic: Exposing children to the disaster

Key Message #1:
1) Talk with children about what they see and hear about the disaster.

Supporting Statements:
   a) The age (and maturity1) of the child should guide how much and the type of information you share about the disaster.
   b) Give younger children fewer details about the disaster.
   c) Listen to the child’s questions and answer them.

Key Message #2:
2) Adults and children have a variety of reactions after disasters.

Supporting Statements:
   a) Children may be scared, worried, upset, have sleep problems, or feel sick.
   b) Younger children may believe an event is happening again if they see it repeated on TV.
   c) Children learn from adults how to react to the disaster.

Key Message #3:
3) Most children will be fine with support from family and friends.

Supporting Statements:
   a) Children of all ages need comfort and attention from the adults in their lives after events like this.
   b) Limiting children’s exposure to media may lessen everyone’s stress.
   c) Talk to a professional if you’re concerned about a child’s reaction.
What should we be doing now (special populations)?

Topic: Self-care advice for vulnerable persons during a disaster

Key Message #1:
1) Take care of yourself during this stressful time.

Supporting Statements:
- a) Create a routine.
- b) Sleep, exercise, eat right, and take prescribed medications.
- c) Allow yourself time to adjust.

Key Message #2:
2) Connect with friends, family and your community

Supporting Statements:
- a) Ask for and accept help when it is offered.
- b) Help others when you can.
- c) You will feel better if you keep in touch with people.

Key Message #3:
3) You may need extra support right now.

Supporting Statements:
- a) Everyone reacts to events like this in their own way.
- b) Focus on things you can control.
- c) Talk to someone if you’re feeling overwhelmed.

Reference:

What can we do to cope with this situation?
Note: This message can be customized for different situations like a disaster, loss of electricity, or any major infrastructure/utility loss. For instance, the question may be “What can we do to cope with the stress of living without electricity?”

Topic: Stress and loss of basic infrastructure

Key Message #1:
1) Adjusting to life after an event like this can be tiring.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) It is common to feel tired or worn out even with enough sleep.
   b) People may be surprised by the intensity of their emotions.
   c) Everyone reacts to stress their own way.

Key Message #2:
2) Take care of yourself.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) Try to eat healthy foods and get plenty of rest.
   b) Accept help from others when it is offered.
   c) Use the time to talk, play games or spend time with friends or family.

Key Message #3:
3) There are many ways to help those affected by this event.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) Offer practical help like cooking, running errands, or babysitting.
   b) Help someone get away from home for a day or a few hours.
   c) Most people will be okay with support from family and friends.

Reference:


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How do we cope with “Cabin Fever?”

Topic: Isolation or Quarantine
Key Message #1:
1) Everyone copes in their own way with situations like this.

Supporting Statements:
   a) Some people may be bored, crabby, or frustrated.
   b) Others may not mind being in this situation.
   c) It’s common for our feelings to change in these situations.

Key Message #2:
2) Knowing the reasons for these measures may make coping easier.

Supporting Statements:
   a) Remember that taking these precautions is in your best interest.
   b) By following directions you are protecting yourself and others.
   c) Remind yourself that this won’t last forever.

Key Message #3:
3) Take things one day at a time

Supporting Statements:
   a) Keep a regular schedule to lessen worry and anxiety.
   b) Do something to take your mind off of the situation for a while.
   c) Hobbies and other interests can help fill time.
What can people do to feel less anxious about a pandemic?

Topic: Anxiety

Key Message #1:
1) Take care of your emotional and spiritual needs.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) It’s common to feel anxious or worried.
   b) Reduce your work load and regular responsibilities if possible.
   c) Stay in contact with friends, family, and spiritual support.

Key Message #2:
2) Good physical health improves your outlook.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) Eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep and exercise.
   b) Avoid using drugs, alcohol, and tobacco to cope.
   c) Keep a regular schedule to lessen worry and anxiety.

Key Message #3:
3) Prepare as you would for any emergency.

   Supporting Statements:
   a) Make a list of healthy ways to take care of your mind and body.
   c) Keep a supply of canned food, water, medicines, and household goods.
How do we deal with strong emotions?

Topic: Strong emotions after a disaster, terrorism or mass casualty

Key Message #1:
1) People may be surprised by intense and changing emotions.

Supporting Statements:
   a) Fear, anger, guilt or sadness are common feelings after an event like this.
   b) You may also notice those emotions in others.
   c) Be patient with yourself and your loved ones.

Key Message #2:
2) Take care of yourself during this stressful time.

Supporting Statements:
   a) Get plenty of rest.
   b) Take time for yourself.
   c) Talk to someone if you’re feeling overwhelmed.

Key Message #3:
3) We will get through this by supporting each other.

Supporting Statements:
   a) Focus on things you can control.
   b) Be available to help others when you can.
   c) Accept help when it is offered.
How are people affected by such a major loss?

Topic: Loss or grief

Key Message #1:
1) Grief is a common response to loss.

Supporting Statements:
   a) There is no set path when grieving, but there are common reactions.
   b) Sometimes people are surprised at how intense and changing their emotions are.
   c) Everyone reacts to loss in their own way.

Key Message #2:
2) Take care of yourself after a loss.

Supporting Statements:
   a) Grief can be exhausting so take care of yourself physically.
   b) Accept help from others when it is offered.
   c) Talk to a professional if you’re concerned about your reaction.

Key Message #3:
3) There are many ways to help someone who has experienced loss.

Supporting Statements:
   a) Offer practical help like cooking, running errands, or babysitting.
   b) Many people in distress appreciate a good listener.
   c) Most people will be okay with support from family and friends.

Reference:


Fact Sheets

The following pages contain brief, one page fact sheets that can be customized with your contact information and used as handouts or additional information for media in a press release.

Additional fact sheets about behavioral health issues related to disaster, terrorism and mass casualty that are specific to a current situation in Nebraska may be posted at www.disastermh.nebraska.edu.

Fact sheets related to a current disaster project will be posted on the Active Recovery Projects page or the Home Page.
After the disaster

There are a number of personal responses to disaster that are common and normal to experience.

Some common responses are:

- Irritability/Anger
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Inability to sleep
- Nightmares
- Shock or disbelief
- Sadness
- Headaches or nausea
- Hyperactivity
- Lack of concentration
- Increased alcohol or drug consumption
- Feeling numb

Many disaster victims, survivors and rescue personnel will have at least one of the above responses. Acknowledging your feelings and stresses is the first step to feeling better. Other helpful actions include:

- Talk or write about your disaster experiences. Sharing your feelings rather than holding them in will help you feel better about the experience.
- Take time off from cares, worries, and home repairs. Engage in recreation, relaxation, or a favorite hobby. Getting away from home for a day or a few hours with close friends also can help.
- Pay attention to your health, a good diet, and adequate sleep. Relaxation exercises may help if you have difficulty sleeping.
- Prepare for possible future emergencies to help lessen feelings of helplessness and to achieve peace of mind.
- Rebuild personal relationships in addition to repairing other aspects of your life. Couples should make time to be alone together, to talk, and to have fun.

If stress, anxiety, depression, or physical problems continue or start interfering significantly with your daily life, you may wish to contact your doctor or mental health professional.
Children’s reaction to the disaster

Children may display a variety of emotional reactions after a disaster. It is very normal to be frightened, insecure, or upset about what happened.

How a parent reacts will make a difference in the child's understanding and recovery after the disaster. Parents should keep children informed about what is happening and explain it in terms they can understand.

Consider talking with the child’s physician or a mental health professional if their emotional reactions concern you.

The following list includes some of the normal reactions children may have to the disaster:

- Crying/Depression
- Bedwetting
- Thumb sucking
- Nightmares
- Clinging/fear of being left alone
- Regression to previous behaviors
- Fighting
- Inability to concentrate
- Temporary withdrawal from others
- Not wanting to attend school
- Headaches
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Excessive fear of darkness
- Increase in physical complaints

These are a few things parents or caregivers can do to help children recover from the disaster:

- Hug your child often.
- Reassure your child frequently that you are safe and together.
- Talk with your child about his/her feelings about the disaster. Share your feelings too. Provide information the child can understand.
- Talk about what happened.
- Spend extra time with your child at bedtime.
- Allow children to grieve about their lost treasures: a toy, a blanket, or a lost home.
- Talk with your child about what you will do if another disaster strikes. Let your child help prepare and plan for future disasters.
- Try to spend extra time together to begin replacing fears with pleasant memories.

Reference:

How to talk to children after the disaster

Note to Parents:
- Remember that you and your child are having normal or common reactions to a very abnormal situation.
- Make sure you take care of your own physical and psychological needs so that you can attend to your child’s needs.

A common misconception is that children will be frightened if you talk to them about what is going on. Children are usually more frightened if you whisper about it and avoid talking to them.

How to start talking
- Give your children direct, undivided attention and let them know you want to listen and help them.
- Let your children ask questions freely and give them simple concrete answers.

How to listen and show you understand:
- Listen carefully to what they say, don’t jump to conclusions, and repeat back to them what you heard them say
- Accept a child’s perceptions. Avoid simply telling them to stop feeling the way they are. Talk about what makes them feel the way they do and what you can do to help.

Reference:


Talking to Children about Death

Here are some simple guidelines that may help families talk to children about the death of a person or pet known or loved by the child.

- Tell the truth as gently as you can.
  *Example,* “Grandpa died. He’s not coming back, but we will always remember him.”
  DON’T: Confuse your child with vague phrases such as “passed away” or “no longer with us.”

- Share your grief.
  *Example,* “I’m very sad. How are you feeling about this?”
  DON’T: Hide your grief and send the message to your child that they should do the same.

- Comfort your child.
  *Example,* “Death is a part of life.” Ease your child’s fears of the unknown. Talk about your spiritual beliefs.

- Deal with your child’s emotions.
  *Example,* “Let’s talk about what you are feeling.”
  DON’T: Tell your child to stop feeling something without explanation.

- Encourage your child to attend memorial services or commemorate the loved one that they lost.
  *Example:* “Would you like to go to the funeral/memorial service?”
  DON’T: Force your child to go.
Common Stress and Emotional Reactions after the Disaster

There are a number of common reactions people have when they are exposed to a traumatic event. **We know that these are normal** and we know it helps to talk or write about them.

- Initial euphoria, relief
- Guilt about surviving or not having suffered as much as others
- Anxiety, fear, insecurity, worry
- Pervasive concern about well-being of loved ones
- Feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, being overwhelmed
- Vulnerability or shame, anger over vulnerability
- Loss of sense of power, control, well-being, self-confidence, trust
- Irritability, restlessness, hyper-excitability, impatience, agitation, anger, blaming (anger at source, anger at those exempted, anger at those trying to help, anger “for no apparent reason”)
- Outrage, resentment
- Frustration
- Cynicism, negativity
- Mood swings
- Despair, grief, sadness
- Periods of crying, emotional “attacks” or “pangs”
- Feelings of emptiness, loss, hopelessness, depression
- Reawakening of past trauma, painful experiences
- Apathy, diminished interest in usual activities
- Feelings of isolation, detachment, estrangement, “no one else can understand”
- Denial or constriction of feelings; numbness
- “Flashbacks,” intrusive memories of the event, illusions, pseudo-hallucinations
- Recurrent dreams of the event or other traumas

- Poor concentration
- Mental confusion, slowness of thinking
- Forgetfulness
- Amnesia (complete or partial)
- Inability to make judgments and decisions
- Preoccupation with the event
- Repetitive, obsessive thoughts and ruminations
- Over-generalization, over-association with the event
- Loss of objectivity
- Confusion regarding religious beliefs/value systems; breakdown of meaning and faith
- Self-criticism over things done/not done during trauma
- Awareness of own and loved ones’ mortality

Exercise Participant Information Sheet: Stress

Thank you for your participation in today’s simulation. An exercise like the one today gives all of us an idea of what we may have to do in similar situations.

It’s quite natural to be a little excited or anxious about participating before the drill begins.

You may find some parts of the drill exciting and others somewhat tedious. If you ever become very uncomfortable or wish to discontinue your participation, say “TIME OUT” so the worker understands your discomfort and can assist you.

After this drill, you may experience some normal stress for a short time. The reality is that this drill is practice for an extremely stressful and frightening situation. It is quite natural to be somewhat shaken by even a simulated situation such as this.

During actual events many people experience stress reactions such as:
- Shock
- Fear
- Grief
- Anger or Resentment
- Guilt or Shame
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness

Many also experience physical changes such as:
- Tension
- Fatigue
- Difficulty sleeping
- Aches or pains

These are normal reactions to very stressful events. Intense or extremely strong emotional reactions are not necessarily a sign that a person will have future trouble. Actually most people can have very strong reactions and recover fairly quickly. We are often stronger or more resilient than we know!

In the extremely unlikely event that you do experience extreme or ongoing stress reactions after this drill that seem to interfere with your normal routine or life, please talk to someone. Talking to a friend, family member, your doctor, counselor, or spiritual leader about your experience can be very helpful.
For more information about stress and disaster, check out these Web Sites.
www.redcross.org
www.redcrosslincolnne.org
www.ncptsd.org
www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov
Post Disaster tips for People with Physical Disabilities

- Do a personal assessment of what you need assistance with now. Don’t be afraid to ask for help.

- Do not be alarmed if you experience the following common psychological and emotional reactions, but seek medical attention if they persist for more than a few weeks following a disaster. These experiences may include:
  - Anxiety
  - Irritability
  - Depression
  - Moodiness
  - Feeling isolated
  - Unwelcome memories of the disaster
  - Nightmares about the disaster or other traumatic events
  - Inability to fall or stay asleep or sleeping excessively

- It is not unusual for stress to make medical conditions worse.

- Not all reactions will occur directly after the disaster. Strong emotions may surface days, weeks, or months after the disaster.

- Talk to someone about how you are feeling.

- After a disaster the independence that you experienced before may be limited. You may not be able to deal with your environment as you did before. Needing help with simple tasks such as straightening your house may make you feel vulnerable. After a disaster many people need support or help.

Special concerns of older adults following a disaster

Each age group is vulnerable in unique ways to the stresses of a disaster. Different issues and concerns become relevant during the emotional recovery. In older adults some disaster stress reactions may be experienced immediately, while others may appear months later. Here are some of the symptoms you or a loved one may be having.

Many who survive a disaster experience a strong desire to withdraw from others. They may withdraw even from those to whom they are the closest. Overcoming the tendency to isolate oneself takes real strength and discipline. A few ways to break the isolation barrier are to:

- **TALK**: It takes courage to reveal what you are thinking and feeling to someone else. Talking can be very comforting and healing. Talking is worth it.

- **ASK FOR HELP**: Research shows that people who ask for help come through disasters stronger and healthier than those who view seeking help as a weakness.

- **BE WITH PEOPLE**: Life does not return to normal overnight. You have survived a disaster. That doesn't mean your life is over or that you don't deserve to be happy again. Do something good for yourself. Now is the time to do it!

Adapted from: [http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/dtac/resources.asp#grantee](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/dtac/resources.asp#grantee)
Disaster and the Adult with a Serious Mental Illness

People with serious mental illness often do well immediately following disaster. They can be an asset to the community. People with serious mental illnesses can often contribute to disaster recovery by volunteering as part of an organized disaster relief effort.

The following advice is designed to help the person with a serious mental illness continue on their road to recovery following disaster.

- Reconnect with your regular mental health service delivery system. If it is disrupted, connect with mental health disaster recovery services to insure your recovery is continuous.
- It is a good idea to help locate peers and help them reconnect with their service provider.
- Consider sharing your experiences with others.
- It’s ok to be alone sometimes. You may need time to deal with your losses and personal issues.
- Get involved in the disaster recovery effort as long as you are not overwhelmed by it.
- Work with your provider to make a disaster preparedness plan for the future.

Reference:

*Responding to the Needs of People with Serious and Persistent Mental Illness in Times of Major Disaster.*