How to Stay Calm in the Midst of the Coronavirus Crisis

The power of positive public messaging

Posted Mar 13, 2020

Pandemic panic is nothing new. But depending on who you are and what your life experiences have entailed, it might be new to you. It is helpful to realize you are not alone if you are experiencing feelings of helplessness or even hopelessness as you watch news coverage of the increasing spread of illness or disease. But thankfully, there are ways to achieve and sustain positivity amidst the panic.

One of the most important things you can do is to make sure you are consuming accurate, authoritative, reputable news. One of the best ways public officials ease public fear is through transmission of the right type and amount of information, delivered in a fashion that people can understand, relate to, and act upon immediately. The challenge, however, is prompting necessary action, while avoiding over-reaction.

Words Matter: Tempering Terms of Distress

As news coverage spreads faster than the actual virus itself, so does public anxiety. We are wise to recognize how much of our reaction comes not from realistic risks, but from emotionally charged terminology. Even the word “pandemic” strikes fear into listeners, whether or not people actually know what it means or how it is defined. And as a public health crisis develops, words like
“quarantine” and “isolation” further alarm community members, who then spring into action in order to stock up in preparation to hunker down.

Social media does us no favors here either. When viral videos of long lines in grocery stores begin to include fist fighting in the aisles over the last roll of toilet paper or bottle of hand sanitizer, we begin to examine the downside of information overload—which can prompt panic buying. Stocking up while preparing to hunker down can create a penchant for over-purchasing, which creates product shortages for others, sometimes including those most in need.

Thankfully, there are ways to calm the storm. Although the coronavirus might be a novel disease, pandemic panic is not. Accordingly, because different diseases have arrived in waves over the years, researchers have been able to examine public response to publicized pandemics in order suggest ways of keeping the public informed, calm, and confident.

Positivity and Proactivity: The Calming Value of Information

In the midst of a public health crisis, the medical community teams up with researchers as well as community and government leaders to inform and equip the public with the information they need to stay safe. Creating positivity while encouraging proactivity requires officials to communicate in a fashion designed to increase public receptivity to important, accurate information.

As recognized by Ronald W. Manderscheid in “Preparing for Pandemic Avian Influenza,” (2007) discussing a prior pandemic, one effective way to prevent panic is information.[i] In his words, “The preventative for panic is information—timely, practical information on the state of affairs and what one should do next.” This emphasis on the immediate is understandable, as we naturally are focused on short-term solutions when in the midst of a crisis, even when we know that our lives are likely to return to normal over time.

Manderscheid notes that information is important to calm public fear because without reliable information from authoritative sources, concerned citizens might make up their own narrative. And those never have a happy ending. In response, among other measures, he suggests agencies train media experts to communicate with the public in a fashion designed to decrease panic and transmit specific instructions. So that community leaders are not speaking off the cuff, he also suggests creating a pre-planned message bank that addresses some of the more predictable issues that will arise such as travel restrictions, rationing, and quarantine instructions. These messages should include important facts related to anticipated duration of a crisis, as well as the rationale for suggested courses of actions.
Manderscheid also suggests that messaging can be improved through the involvement of both the general public and community leaders in message testing and revision. Some of the issues to be considered when reviewing messages include anticipated cultural and psychological impact, as well as ensuring that messages, whether in print, Internet, or through broadcast media, are sufficiently diverse, both culturally and linguistically.

Emphasizing Power Over Fear

Positive messaging combined with realistic and specific information appears to be a winning combination when public fear is high. The goal is to focus on safety strategies that can equip community members with the tools they need to spring into action to protect themselves and their families, while avoiding unnecessary drain on public services.

Sharing information about practical issues ranging from emergency numbers to staple shelf lives give community members as sense of power over their circumstances that can decrease their sense of helplessness, and improve hopefulness and outlook for the future.