

# **Crisis Communication:**

## **"Panic Panic" and Fear of Fear (*Page 1*)**

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### **"Panic Panic"**

1. *Don't expect panic when it's unlikely.* Panic is relatively rare. People may feel panicky in a crisis, but they usually act in calm and orderly ways.
2. *Don't think it's panic when it isn't.* Disobedience, mistrust, worry, and even excessive caution are not panic. And be careful not to project your own panic (or your performance anxiety) onto the public.
3. *Don't try to "allay" panic by misleading, blindsiding, or over-reassuring people.* These strategies, paradoxically, might even provoke panic.

### **Fear of Fear**

1. *Don't overestimate the harm done by fear.* This error includes the false expectation that fear will inevitably escalate into panic and the mistaken belief that people cannot tolerate their fear. It also includes the failure to notice that fearful people often rise to resilient and even heroic behavior, and seldom stay fearful for long before settling into the New Normal.
2. *Don't underestimate the good done by fear.* Fearful people are more vigilant, more likely to take precautions, more tolerant of preparedness inconvenience and expense.
3. *Don't imagine that fear can be avoided.* Fear is inevitable in response to new and frightening risks. Even more fundamentally, fear is ever-present; mostly, it is reallocated rather than created to accommodate a new object.
4. *Don't do harmful things to avoid frightening people.* Withholding information, making over-reassuring statements, and expressing contempt for people's fears tend to backfire, frightening the public all the more.
5. *Don't forget to do things to help people bear their fear.* Offer people things to do; legitimize their fear; show that you also are fearful, and can bear it; show that you think they can bear it too.

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### **What Roosevelt Really Said**

When U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt warned Americans in 1933 that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," he wasn't telling people not to be frightened of the Great Depression. He was telling them not to allow their understandable, justified fears to keep them from doing what needed to be done. The fear he feared was excessive, extreme, over-the-top fear -- not normal fear, as the quotation is usually (mis)interpreted.

The exact quote is instructive:

*"So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself -- nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."*

Too much fear -- terror, panic, or denial -- gets in the way of action. So does too little fear. To aim for the optimal level of public fear conducive to our ability to cope with the crisis, officials must first overcome their "panic panic" and their fear of fear.