

Crisis Communication:

Encouraging an Active Rather than Passive Public (*Page 1*)

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Why to encourage people to act:

- Action binds anxiety. People who are doing things to protect themselves can bear their fear better and are less likely to flip into denial.
- Action reduces misery. People who are doing things to help others are less likely to sink into depression or hopeless apathy.
- Action teaches lessons. People who are doing things seek out information to make sense of what they are doing. They teach themselves that the danger is real (otherwise action would be unnecessary) and that it is manageable (otherwise action would be futile). This is exactly what we want them to learn.
- Action is useful for the situation itself. At every stage of the crisis -- before, during, and after -- people can be of genuine service to themselves, their families, their neighbors ... and you.

How to encourage people to act:

1. *Offer people things to do.* People are more likely to take action when the action opportunities are clear.
2. *Ask people to do things.* Some people respond better to the offer ("here's what you can do if you want"), some to the request ("here's what we hope you will agree to do"). Provide both.
3. *Let people do things.* If many people are settling on some action of their own that helps them feel safer or less miserable, think twice before you criticize their choice. Unless it is really dangerous, you would be wiser to tolerate it.
4. *Support symbolic actions too.* Symbolic action is a poor substitute for genuinely useful action. But almost any action is greatly preferable to no action at all. And sometimes symbolic action (flying flags, wearing buttons, etc.) can be a morale-builder and a path out of paralysis.
5. *Model the actions you recommend.* If you want people to give blood, give blood. If you want them to wear face masks, wear a face mask. Make your go-kit and your three-day supply of food into a photo-op.

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6. *Tell people how.* "Mobilizing information" is information that helps people implement a course of action: the telephone number of the volunteer center, the instructions for storing the antibiotic. People often make a tentative decision to act, then stop because they are not sure how to begin. Mobilizing information gets them over the hump.
7. *Offer a choice of actions.* Giving people a menu of actions to choose from recruits not just their ability to act, but also their ability to decide. It is therefore even more effective in helping people bear their fear and misery.
8. *Bracket recommended precautions.* X is the minimum precaution you consider acceptable. Y is your recommended precaution. Z is an additional precaution for people who feel especially vulnerable. Surrounding your Y with an X and a Z yields more compliance with Y. And it defines those who prefer X or Z as still part of the plan, not rebels.
9. *Leave some decisions to the individual.* Many crisis management decisions really need to be collective. But voluntary choice gives people a greater sense of control, which reduces the probability of denial or panic. Frame some individual decisions without any recommendation.
10. *Seek people's advice.* On decisions that need to be collective, seek public input on what the collective decision should be, sharing the dilemma and empowering the community. Go beyond pro forma public involvement to encourage public debate on difficult decisions before the decision is made.
11. *Plan to use volunteers wisely.* In a crisis, many people will volunteer to help. Turning them away is a lose-lose. Work on legal and logistical issues in advance, so when the crisis comes you will be ready to manage a volunteer workforce.
12. *Ask more of people.* In a crisis, pro-social, resilient impulses vie for dominance with fear, passivity, and selfishness. Ally with the former against the latter by asking more of people at every crisis stage -- before, during, and after. People do more, and feel better, when they are asked to do more.

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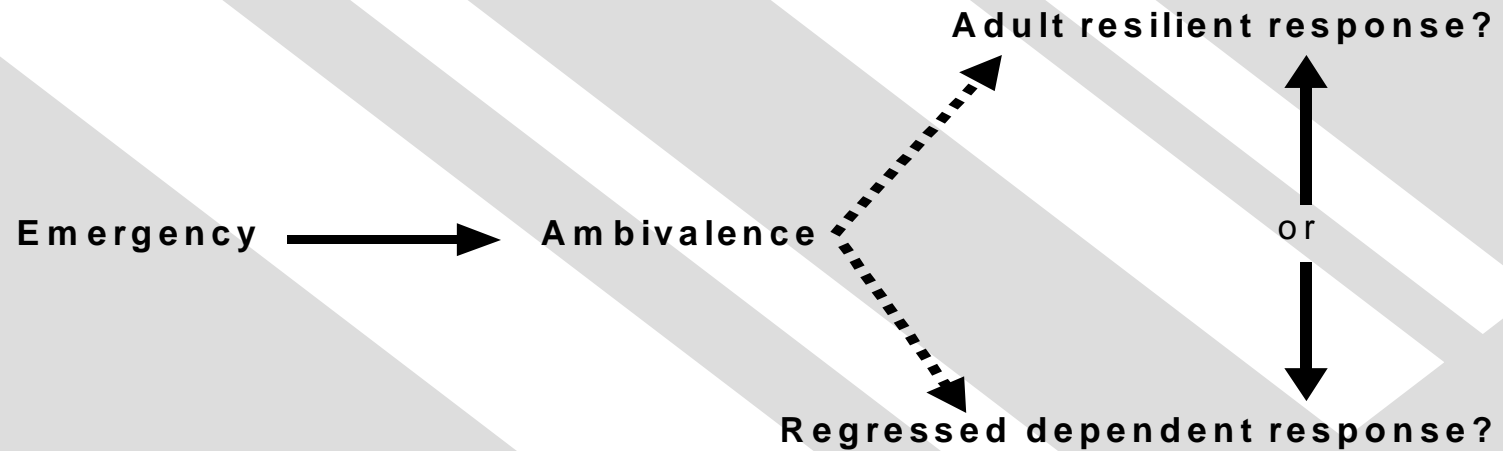
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13. *Ask more of people emotionally too.* People cope better when asked and expected to cope. (Of course some people also need "permission" to be unable to cope, at least for a while.) Even while validating how frightened or powerless people may feel, communicate that you know they will mostly be able to get through it and act appropriately despite their feelings.
14. *Tap into the social structure.* Reach out now to existing organizations, from social clubs to tenants associations to service groups. Involve them in pre-crisis decision-making. Ask them to organize their own networks -- to help people get ready for the crisis, and to get ready to help people if the crisis materializes. Nurture people's autonomy and interdependence, rather than their dependence on you.
15. *Notice and publicize examples of empowered action.* Look for role models -- acts of resilience and creativity and altruism. Acknowledge and validate them. Spread the word.

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Ask More of People: Ally with Our Adult Selves!