Communicating and Managing Uncertainty in the COVID-19 Pandemic: A quick guide

Uncertainty during the COVID-19 Pandemic

- **Uncertainty is inevitable.** A pandemic like COVID-19 has not been seen in a century, and much remains unknown and evolving about the situation and the virus that causes it.
- **Uncertainty leads to fear**, panic and loss of trust among people.
- **Risk communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) research identifies tactics** to communicate and manage uncertainty effectively by building public trust in health authorities and gaining adherence to health recommendations.

How to Manage Uncertainty

1. **Be Transparent**
   - Announce new policies and findings early as possible even when some information and circumstances are uncertain
   - Present information in an easy-to-understand format

2. **Explicitly communicate information about uncertainty**
   - Say what is known and unknown about new policies and findings
     - where possible surround “unknowns” with more “knowns”, it will build confidence in health authorities as knowledgeable experts
   - Say how decisions are being made in the midst of uncertainty
   - When you do not have answers to all the questions, say how health authorities are acting to resolve questions/uncertainties

*Based on research and evidence on risk communication presented by Dr Marsha Vanderford at the SEARO RCCE webinar, 18 May 2020 on “How to communicate uncertainty at a time of transition in the COVID-19 pandemic”.*
3. **Maintain consistency over time**

*Uncertainty causes stress and lack of clarity for individual and community actions. As the situation changes, old information that is still circulating, that contradicts the new information, can create confusion and lack of confidence in authorities.*

- Set expectations that change is expected:
  - Consistently say that current information and recommendations are based on current information, and that new ones are likely, as new information is uncovered
- Title everything “interim” or provisional”; label later editions as “updates”
- Create a delivery-and-update system for rapidly getting new/updated information to at-risk populations and stakeholders while rapidly replacing old information and recommendations with new ones
- Time and date stamp all documents, web postings, social media posts to help people identify the most recent information

4. **Maintain consistency in communication among partners**

*When different information is circulating from various partners or sources, this leads to confusion and lack of confidence in health authorities.*

- Ensure the delivery-and-update system (mentioned above) includes key partners who are trusted by at-risk groups and stakeholders and who are able to rapidly deliver and replace information as health authorities learn more about COVID-19
- Sensitize partners to enable communication to be aligned, and to ensure that partners are also updating their information

5. **Communicate Action**

- Consistently include in messaging, actions that people can take to protect themselves and those they care about. Uncertainty produces stress and urgency to act.
- Include actions that should be taken to protect people at different levels of risk (minimum to maximum for different levels of risk)

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Key References:


More information on COVID-19 risk communication and community engagement at: