Effective communication is in its own right a non-pharmaceutical intervention (NPI) for COVID-19 that can increase adherence to protective behaviours necessary to mitigate the spread of the virus. There is no ‘best practice’ for communication during a complex public health emergency, but past experience has led to several principles that contribute to a successful strategy.

As we work to support hospitals and reduce the spread of COVID-19, the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) focused on understanding the impact of the complexities of behaviour and cognitive biases that can lead to more effective communication strategies with the goal of encouraging behaviours that reduce the spread of COVID-19. To further support hospitals and their communities, the OHA has prepared a summary of the research and resources for effective communication strategies for COVID-19 and guidance on how to evolve strategies over the course of the pandemic to ensure impact and reach.

Elements and Principles of Effective Communication Strategies

There are a number of published guides from the World Health Organization (WHO), the US Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC), and others that outline good risk communication based on lessons learned from past health crises, including Ebola and Zika (Toppenberg-Pejcic et al., 2019).

Early learnings are also being drawn from jurisdictions that have thus far been successful at containing transmission of the virus and preventing deaths. Researchers at University of British Columbia have identified five main principles of democratic health communications that have enabled some countries to successfully control widespread transmission of COVID-19 (Tworek et al., 2020).

Choosing appropriate language and metaphors is also an important component of effective communication.

The British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) has released a COVID-19 language guide that outlines preferred phases and words to use in order to avoid stigma, implying fault, and putting undue onus on individuals.

Some metaphors may do more harm than good. War metaphors (e.g., fight, battle, attack), particularly entrenched in health and disease rhetoric, may lead to stigmatization and xenophobic action rather than societal cohesion (Nie et al., 2016; Bates, 2020; Serhan, 2020).

The table below synthesizes and combines evidence-based recommendations for effective messaging and communication from across various documents in the “Resources” referenced at the end of this document.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>ELEMENTS/PRINCIPLES</strong></th>
<th><strong>MEASURES</strong></th>
<th><strong>EXAMPLES</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trust and Credibility</strong></td>
<td><strong>Do</strong></td>
<td><strong>Examples</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Acknowledge uncertainty; explain what is known/unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td>Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany, used science and clear explanations of disease modelling in discussing an exit out of lockdown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Be honest and transparent; explain what actions are being taken and why</td>
<td></td>
<td>Christian Dorsten, a leading coronavirus virologist in Germany and advisor to Angela Merkel, launched a podcast in February to explain the science behind the virus and latest research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Employ mechanisms of accountability</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Director General of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health admitted that the lockdown was likely excessive and that the same outcome could have been achieved with less restrictive measures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rely on messengers who are competent and experts in the field</td>
<td></td>
<td>Steak-umm, a brand selling frozen sliced meat, became an unlikely source for good science communication, education in media literacy and critical thinking, and dispelling misinformation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Be consistent in messaging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Use simple messages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Correct misinformation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avoid</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Over reassurance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fostering unrealistic expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Drawing too much attention to misinformation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empathy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Do</strong></td>
<td>Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland’s First Minister, delivered a speech to Parliament on September 22 that is empathetic and expresses gratitude to the people of Scotland for their ongoing sacrifices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Acknowledge concerns, hardship and express understanding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Express gratitude</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avoid</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Shaming and blaming people and organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Autonomy and Empowerment</strong></td>
<td><strong>Do</strong></td>
<td>BC laid out a set of principles for safe socializing rather than issuing specific restrictions on smaller gatherings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Give people choice within a set of guidelines/principles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Express confidence in people’s ability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Give people things to do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide specific descriptions of desired behaviours</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avoid</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being paternalistic and overly authoritarian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Implying that the facts are too difficult to understand</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Values, Emotions, and Stories

**Do**
- Focus on messages of solidarity, kindness, and love
- Appeal to “collective” good
- Link behaviours to people’s identities
- Focus on people adopting desirable behaviour
- Outline/stories that contextualize risk
- Respect cultural beliefs/values

**Avoid**
- Drawing attention to undesirable behaviours
- Appealing to fear
- Militaristic analogies/metaphors that may breed fear and xenophobic sentiment

Both Germany and South Korea adopted messaging that focused on solidarity and encouragement of public cooperation.

Senegal, ranked second in a Financial Post COVID-19 Global Response Index, has acknowledged each death and extended condolences to families.

### Public Involvement

**Do**
- Engage public in raising awareness
- Use messengers trusted by target audience
- Amplify public voices

In New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern has live streamed her conversations with regular New Zealanders to share their stories and advice in “Conversations through COVID.”

### Speed

**Do**
- Communicate accurate information as early as possible
- Acknowledge that early information may change

Taiwan launched an early communications strategy coordinated by the Central Epidemic Command Center that reduced panic buying and increased respiratory hygiene practices.

**Avoid**
- Allowing misinformation and rumour to fill information void

### Audience Segmentation

**Do**
- Make messages sensitive to demographics of intended target

The BC CDC released a campaign targeted at youth called Dr. Bonnie Henry’s Good Times Guide.

### Institutionalization

**Do**
- Depoliticize health communication
- Create a pandemic communication unit
- Limit the number of institutions/people delivering messages

South Korea has given all communication control to the Korean Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) and its Office of Communication.

BC mostly deferred public health messaging to Dr. Bonnie Henry, the provincial health officer.
Challenges to Effective Communications

Many social and behavioural factors moderate the impact of communication during crises.

• **Information processing** is affected by stress and uncertainty.
  - People may not hear, not remember, or misinterpret information.
  - People hold on to tightly held beliefs and may be less likely to engage in behaviour that is counterintuitive.
  - People may exhibit “confirmation bias” and seek out information that supports their beliefs.
  - The first message tends to be believed the most strongly. Subsequent information is compared to this first message.

• **Threat perception** is altered by fear and other negative emotions.
  - Messages that incite fear tend to only be successful in producing a desired behaviour when people feel a strong sense of efficacy (Bavel et al., 2020).
  - Feelings of fear may result in people behaving inappropriately to avoid threats (e.g., xenophobic attacks).
  - How people interpret and heed messages is also influenced by people’s tendency to exhibit “optimism bias”, a belief that leads people to assume they are invulnerable and are less likely to contract COVID-19 than others (Halpern et al., 2020).

• **Risk perception** is driven by emotions and is often biased, leading to poor decision-making.
  - Emotions, such as fear and disgust, form the basis for judgements of risk – “affect heuristic” (Finucane et al., 2000). Risk is often perceived as greater when a person is fearful but is downplayed when a person is angry.
  - Information that can be easily recalled, because it is recent or emotionally significant, can overly influence judgements of risk – “availability heuristic” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).
  - Risks that are perceived as acceptable are voluntary, are under a person’s control, have clear benefits, are generated by a trusted source, affect adults, and are familiar (Tumpey et al., 2019).

• **Social context** influences how messages are perceived and how decisions are made.
  - Under stress, people tend towards herd behaviour, making decisions based on the behaviour of others (e.g., panic buying, hoarding) (Kameda & Hastie, 2015).
  - Perceived social norms among peers (e.g., family, friends, community) influence a person’s own likelihood to engage in a particular behaviour. Social networks can promote the spread of beneficial as well as harmful behaviour.
  - Cultural norms and cultural identity factor strongly into how people make decisions but may also underlie disease risk. Messaging needs to address community risks (e.g., disproportionate impact on racialized communities) and be framed in a way that is culturally relevant to the target audience (Airhihenbuwa et al., 2020).

Drawing on behavioural insights and social science can serve as a starting point for communication strategies that target specific behaviour change (Soofi et al., 2020). For example, messaging reinforcing that a person who fails to physically distance will contract COVID-19 may elicit fear, increase the perceived risk, which may in turn increase a person’s likelihood of physically distancing.

The extent to which behavioural insights are able to change behaviour within the context of COVID-19 are still poorly understood. Nudging, an intervention that involves manipulating the environment in order to alter people’s choice, changed people’s intentions but did not actually change people’s behaviour (Hume et al., 2020).
Resources

- World Health Organization - Outbreak Communication Guidelines
- US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
  - Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication
    - Messages and Audiences
    - Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication: Psychology of a Crisis
- European CDC – Outbreak Communications
- Behavioural Insights Team – COVID-19 Resources
  - Crafting Effective Communication During a Crisis
- Impact Canada – COVID-19 Communications to Drive Positive Behaviour Change
  - Developed social media messaging based on behavioural insights.
- COVID-19 Communication Network (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health) – Synthesized Guidance for COVID-19 Message Development
- UK Centre for Social and Behavioural Change – Communication Related Behavioural Insights
- BC CDC - COVID-19 Language Guide

References


