



**Risk Communication Tips
for Military Personnel Involved
in the March 2011 Japan Crisis**

Technical Information Paper No. 33-002-0311

PURPOSE. To provide basic risk communication tips to personnel involved in the March 2011 Japan crisis.

BACKGROUND

Risk communication is a research-based technical approach for communicating effectively in situations involving high concern, strong emotions, controversy, sensitivity, and/or low trust. The goal of risk communication efforts is to increase public knowledge and understanding; enhance trust in you and your organization; and minimize negative impacts, such as undue fear and concern. People who simply want more information and are not unduly concerned should be referred to the resources provided at the end of this paper. For all others, this document outlines some proven risk communication principles and tools to assist military commanders and staff in communicating effectively with worried individuals and audiences.

GOOD RISK COMMUNICATION IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY. Every person who interacts with a worried individual has a role in practicing good risk communication skills, and in identifying concerns and responding to them well. Research shows that people judge the quality of information and responses based on trustworthiness. A poor response or interaction only serves to exacerbate undue concern about the risk. A poor risk communication response by even one individual could increase a stakeholder's concern or outrage, which makes everyone's job harder.

VERBALLY ACKNOWLEDGE CONCERNS OF WORRIED PEOPLE ONCE IDENTIFIED. Research shows that during times of a crisis, worried people need to know that you understand and accept that they are concerned, regardless of the validity of concerns. Verbally acknowledging concerns (for example, "I can see that you're worried. Let me tell you what I've learned about this

situation...”) is an important step in decreasing concerns, and can minimize repeat issues. This also holds true for military members on staff, who may also be worried due to their close, frequent interactions with the crisis.

ADDRESS AND ACKNOWLEDGE THE UNCERTAINTIES AND UNKNOWNNS related to the crisis or emergency situation, and followed with what is being done to decrease them. Setting the stage upfront helps people mentally prepare for future risks, evacuation, etc. and provides reassurance that you, the Japanese Government and the U.S. Government are taking active steps to continue to protect public health.

BE WILLING TO LISTEN MORE. Although everyone dealing with the crisis or emergency is over-extended, truly listening and being understanding are proven risk communication tools in decreasing unnecessary concerns. Be aware of your own non-verbal actions, such as focusing on the person while he or she is talking, as well as those of the worried person, such as facial expressions. Active listening helps demonstrate you care about the other person’s well-being, and that you are committed to protecting public health. Doing so can help people “convince themselves” that personal actions can be the most effective steps in protecting themselves and their families. One main item is **Don’t over reassure.** Although worried people want to know that things will turn out fine, research shows that most people also cope well with incomplete reassurance. In fact, downplaying the risk, over-reassuring, or making false promises can eventually backfire by decreasing your credibility and increasing concerns.

BE WILLING TO SAY “I DON’T KNOW” AND BE COMMITTED TO FINDING THE ANSWER. In the face of mounting uncertainties related to the crisis situation, no one can be expected to have all the answers to every question. Provide information that you do have, honestly state that you don’t know the answer, and then either take steps yourself to close the information loop, or refer the person to someone or somewhere that can help.

PROVIDE HOPE AND EXPLICITLY EMPHASIZE WHAT PEOPLE CAN DO TO PROTECT THEMSELVES. Research shows that in a crisis, people want to be

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engaged in the response and empowered to take protective actions. Emphasizing standard actions affords people some level of control as this situation continues to unfold. Additional risk communication resources are listed below.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION and CERC or health risk communication support, please contact the [USAPHC, Army Institute of Public Health, Risk Communication Program](#) by e-mailing usachppmhrpc@amedd.army.mil or by calling (410) 436-3515 or 1 (800) 222-9698.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication:
<http://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/index.asp>

CERC Tip Cards:

<http://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/pdf/CERC-Pubs-Wallets.pdf>

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