



Encouraging Family Communication after a Disaster

Promoting the Health and Well-Being of Families During Difficult Times

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Good family communication is necessary to effectively work together to prevent or respond to crises. This fact sheet offers ways of developing communication skills that help families not only to survive crises, but also to improve their daily lives. It provides helpful ways to think about communication, explains why family communication is sometimes difficult, and shows how family members of all ages can increase their well-being through family meetings by applying simple rules for good communication.

But We're a Family--of Course We Communicate!

We talk and write to friends, co-workers and family members all the time. But special attention needs to be paid to communication during times of family change or community disaster. If it's easier to communicate respectfully and clearly with people you hardly know than with your own family members, or if communicating under stress feels overwhelming, or even if you feel your family communicates well already, this fact sheet may be of interest.

It can indeed be hard to communicate calmly with the people who share our roof and responsibilities and in whom we have invested a great deal of ourselves. Adding to the difficulties of family communication are the strong emotions that relying on each other brings. Even within the same family, the definition of good or clear communication may differ for family members of different generations, cultures, ages, or gender. Furthermore, in a crisis or disaster we may not feel sure of ourselves and how or if we should share our feelings (e.g., fear, anger, sorrow) and thoughts (e.g. of blame, hope, problem-solving). This fact sheet can help you improve your existing communication skills and gain new ones to weather normal family changes and crises.

Communication Skills

Both listening and speaking are necessary to successfully communicate. Listening gives you valuable information about your family. The information your loved ones share should not be ignored, even if you dislike what or how it is said. At times, a family member in crisis may pull away from you. Part of good communication is the ability to accept temporary withdrawal or silence, as even this silence can be informative to you and helpful to your family member. Likewise, speaking up and clearly stating what you feel and think is an important part of coping with your family's immediate needs in daily life and in a crisis. Communication also keeps us connected to family and community. Being connected helps ground us in reality and reduces the stress we feel due to crises and daily hassles.

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Crisis Planning and Prevention Require Communication

Crises come in all shapes and sizes. Communication skills, planning, and practice in dealing with smaller crises can help families cope with larger problems. The following are examples of crises and the communication issues they may raise:

- War and terrorism may require rapid and planned emergency responses. They may also result in difficult discussions with children or family disagreement on political issues.
- Major illness is often unexpected, but requires substantial ongoing planning, and the sharing of emotions and concerns after the initial shock of the illness or disability.
- The impact of job loss can be prepared for through education and savings, but these preparations may bring on their own family crises about how to handle family duties and income.
- Natural disasters may bring neighbors and community resources to us, but these supports may leave before we have experienced a full recovery from our loss.
- Family changes (separation, death, adoption or its disruption, loss of a pregnancy) may or may not bring friends closer to us. In such cases, families may choose to be more private than usual in their communications. These events put as much or more stress on a family than events such as hurricanes, which are seen as beyond any human's fault or control.
- The developmental transitions of both children and adults can be disruptive. For example, adjustment is required when children enter adolescence or when adults enter retirement age. These normal changes are also often seen as family crises due to the conflicts they may create. While all families experience these changes, we may feel alone as we go through them. Such changes demand our best communication skills. Often these "normal" crises bring critical comments from well-meaning friends, relatives and even from ourselves. Clear and open communication helps teens, elders and adults weather the normal changes that shape and reshape families.
- Family violence and substance abuse can disrupt any family. Frank discussion,

willingness to seek help, and speaking up and listening to others without judging them are essential to responding to these common problems. Communication without judging allows others to be open and seek our help.

Don't wait until a crisis before learning and sharing what communication styles and tools work for you and your family. In preparing families for change or crisis, it is best to practice communication skills. One way to develop skills for good communication is to have regular family meetings.

Family Meetings

Family meetings are a simple but very useful way to help families deal with their concerns. In these meetings work on goals and problems alike, but begin with issues you know will go smoothly as you work out the how-to's of your communication (e.g. time and place; show respect even when you disagree). By meeting regularly, you will get used to sharing feelings, reaching out for support, writing down plans, and coming to consensus (waiting to act until everybody agrees). Most experts and families agree that practicing communication takes time and may even feel a little awkward or "fake" at first, but it will feel more natural and the time will feel well spent as your skills improve. Simple planning and ground-rules make family meetings a success:

- Begin your first family meetings with items dealing with fun or praise. First make them fun; then deal with business. Organize the meeting so that it is not too long. Lengthy meetings may get boring. Let everyone speak. Take turns playing the roles of focus-keeper, note-taker and time-watcher.
- Family meetings during or after a crisis work best if they have been a family routine. Develop a tradition that starts and ends the meeting—traditions anchor us in storms of crisis.
- Use consensus—base a final decision on what everyone has agreed to or can live with.
- Make sure every family member feels welcome to attend the meetings but does not feel forced to attend.
- Use "I"-sentences (speak from your own heart) and avoid placing blame; take a break when tempers flare.

- Keep to one topic at a time. Summarize the discussion.
- End each meeting with something fun or affectionate.

Skills developed in family meetings will help your family cope with disaster and normal family changes. In daily life, family meetings are a great place to set new family rules and share feelings and concerns. In a crisis, skills developed in regular family meetings will help us feel connected to each other and to reality, and will help us communicate.

Communication in a Crisis

When we are in a crisis, we are bound to feel stressed. The following strategies have been shown to help individuals communicate more effectively when they are under stress:

- Learn your stress signals and those of your family members. Stress signals are the warning lights of anger and “shut down”. They include such non-verbal cues as feeling hot, looking away, etc.
- Be honest, but say what you need to with care, tact, and courtesy while remaining focused on the issue at hand.
- Think through your problem before you speak; get all the facts.
- Listen, take turns, lead when necessary, and hear without interrupting or criticizing.
- Check your interpretations of what others are telling you. Don’t assume anything.

Using these tips will help each person in your family to communicate what help he or she needs and can offer to others.

Children

Crises may affect each member of a family differently. Each person’s resources (e.g., communication skills, knowledge, money, experience, friends, faith) and roles (parent, child, elder, spouse, partner) play a part in how they will respond and communicate to others in the family and community. Children often make good problem solvers and rise to the occasion, although they need to be kept informed and supported with clear and caring communication. These tips have been found to be especially helpful to children (and work with most adults as well):

- Involve children in family meetings based on their age and ability to understand.
- Discuss the family’s needs and the child’s role in helping to meet those needs.
- Provide simple, honest answers to questions.
- Listen without judging or criticizing the child’s worries.
- Make clear statements of confidence in the family’s ability to survive the crisis.

Summary

In a crisis, you will want to understand others and have them understand you. You will want to know if your partner’s or child’s silence means agreement, fear or something else. Becoming aware of communication roadblocks (blocking out information, ignoring warning signs, placing blame or losing control of your temper) and effective communication styles help families in times of crisis. Tips for keeping communication clear include:

- Have regular family meetings before, during, and after crises.
- Help family members share what makes for good communication for them.
- Be sure to listen, as advice is not always appropriate—sometimes a good listener is all we need. Use “I” statements, and encourage others to do the same. Work towards consensus. Be honest but polite.
- Learn your stress signals. Clearly state both what you need and what you can do to help.
- Check to see if you were understood— don’t leave room for guessing and bad feelings based on misunderstanding. Remember, every person, even a child, has something important to contribute.
- Keep breathing and do not sit too long; we were made to go forward.

Crises come and go, but when we communicate clearly and respectfully with those we love, when we reach out to give and get help, we are better able to deal with present and future crises. Developing our family communication skills can even help us to enjoy family life more.

Internet Resources

Supporting Families Following a Disaster: The University of Arizona College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Cooperative Extension has designed this series of fact sheets covering special needs of families during difficult times. http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting_families/

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