

How Individuals in
Crisis Process
Information:

Implications for
educators

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No conflicts to disclose

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One superintendent noted: "There wasn't a day that went by in the year following the crisis that we didn't face a communication-related challenge. It was like a tsunami, something complicated every day. A constant stream of people asking, wanting something."

Source: Thompson et al. (2017). Analyzing Postcrisis Challenges and Strategies Associated With School Shootings: An Application of Discourse of Renewal Theory. *Communication Studies*, 68(5), 540.

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Crisis + heightened public emotions + limited access to facts + rumor, gossip, speculation, assumption, and inference =
an unstable information environment

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002, p. 5).

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CERC Corner

CERC CORNER

CRISIS + EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATIONS

CERC Corners are based on content from CDC's [CERC Manual](#) and bring CERC to life. Read about different CERC topics and how others are using CERC to communicate about emergencies.

Introduction to CERC



Psychology Of A Crisis



Messages And Audiences



Crisis Communication Plans



Spokesperson



Community Engagement



Media, Social Media & Mobile Media Devices



<https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/cerccorner/index.asp>

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People believe the first message.

- When we lack information, we “fill in the blanks” with our existing beliefs.
- Rumors begin, as a way of supplying the missing information.
- We compare later messages with what we heard first, which leads to questioning the new information.
- Be first. Release accurate information as soon as possible
- Repeat the key information.
- Use multiple credible sources, all conveying the same information (e.g., scripting the message about a homework policy).

Source: Kerr, M. M. and King, G. (2018). *School crisis prevention and intervention, 2nd Edition*. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014a).

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We hold on to current beliefs.

- We hesitate to change our minds.
- We may trust advice from a familiar though uninformed person, while rejecting advice from experts we don't know.
- Be credible.
- Get trusted persons to help you deliver the information.
- Acknowledge the current belief, before reminding people of new and credible information.

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We look for more information and opinions.

- We seek confirmation before acting (change TV channels, check with friends, read multiple social media sites).
- We watch others to see what action they take.
- Hold virtual briefings or send updates on the same day each week.
- Use routines to make things predictable.
- Remind people what they've been doing well.

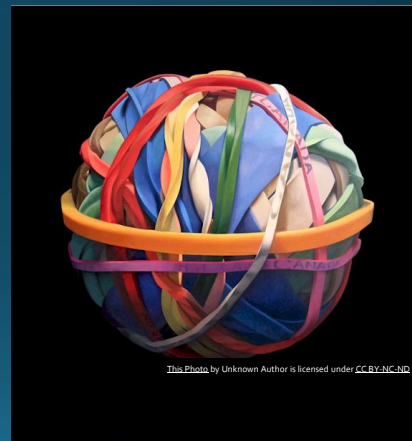
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We simplify information.

- We misinterpret nuanced or confusing communications.
- We tend to forget long messages.
- Keep messages simple.
- Avoid confusing language.
- Use translations and oral interpreters.
- Check the readability of text using an on-line app or the readability checker in your word processing app.
- Use the accessibility checker in Word

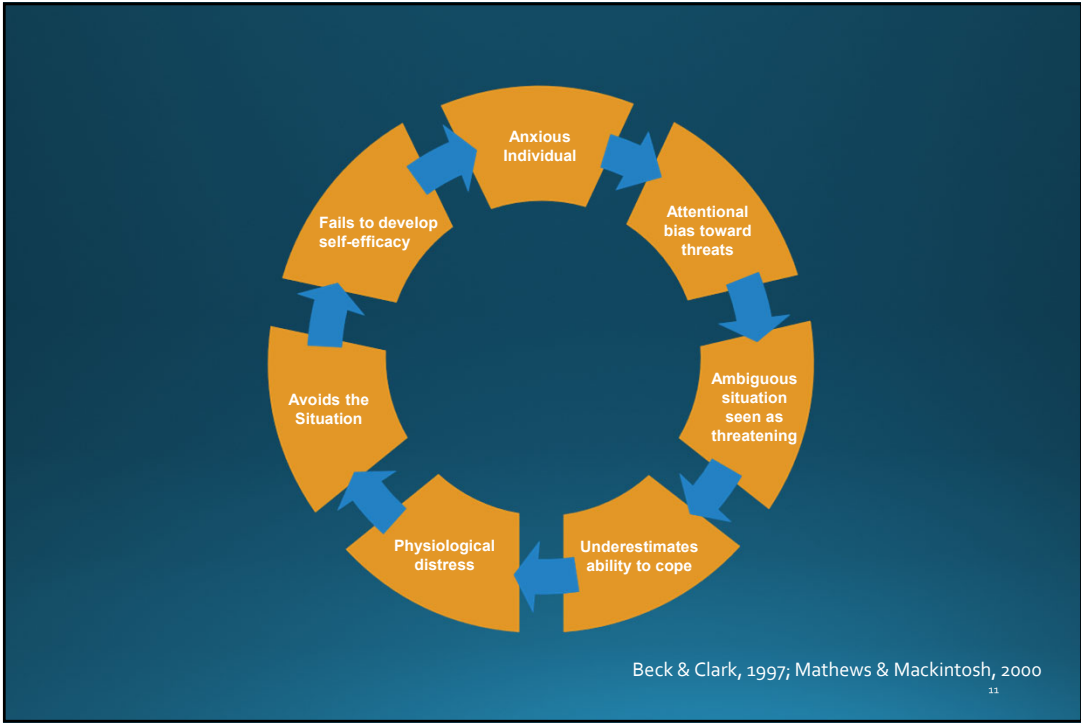
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What we know:
How does an
anxious person
process information?



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Can you identify “threats” that parents or guardians might perceive?

I didn’t make the right _____.

My child will _____.

Someone in my family will _____.

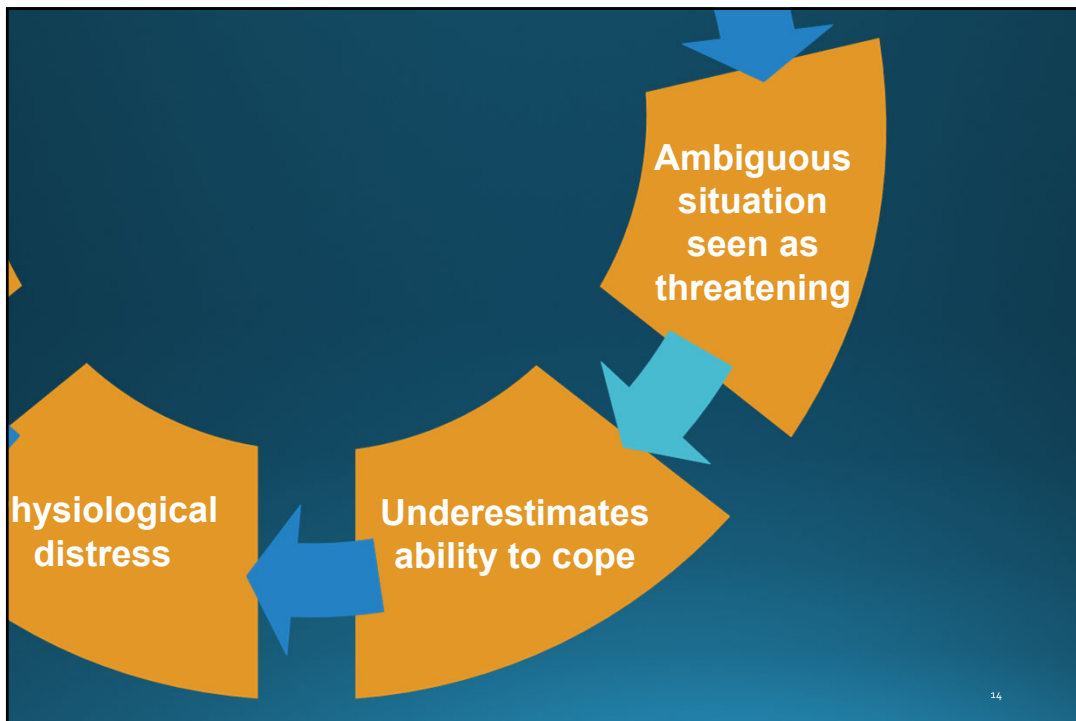
I will _____.

The school staff will _____.

The school expects me to _____.

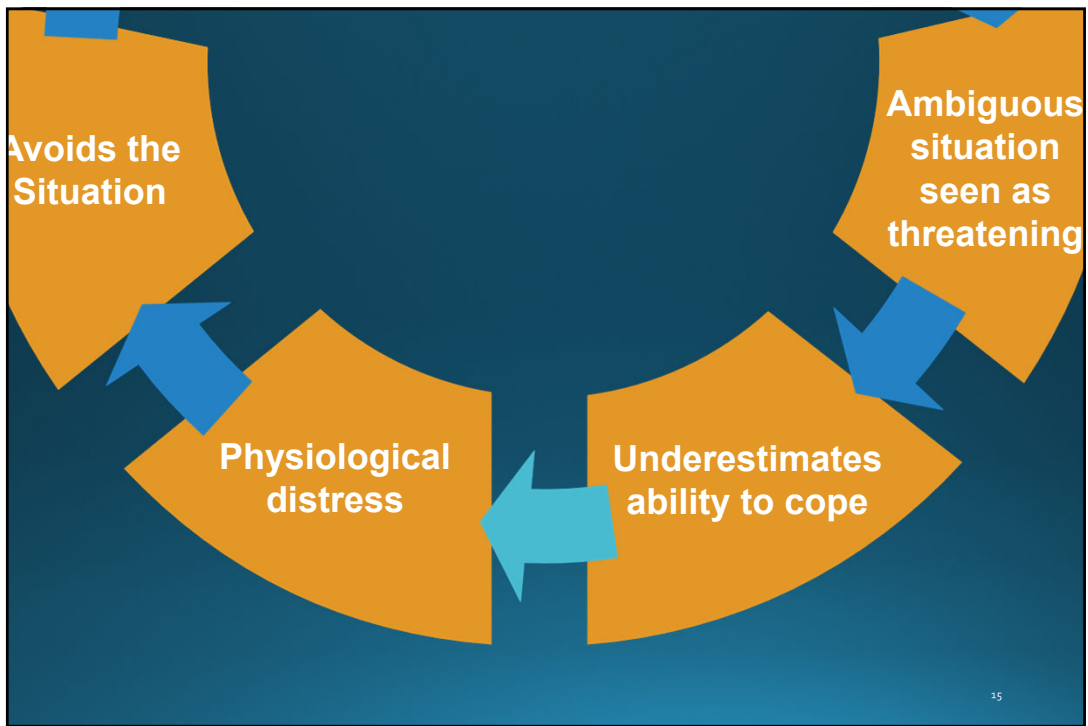
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What would tell you that someone underestimates their coping ability?

- "I just don't see _____."
- "How can you expect me to _____?"
- "Is everyone else able to _____?"
- "I am feeling _____."
- "Did anyone stop to think about _____?"

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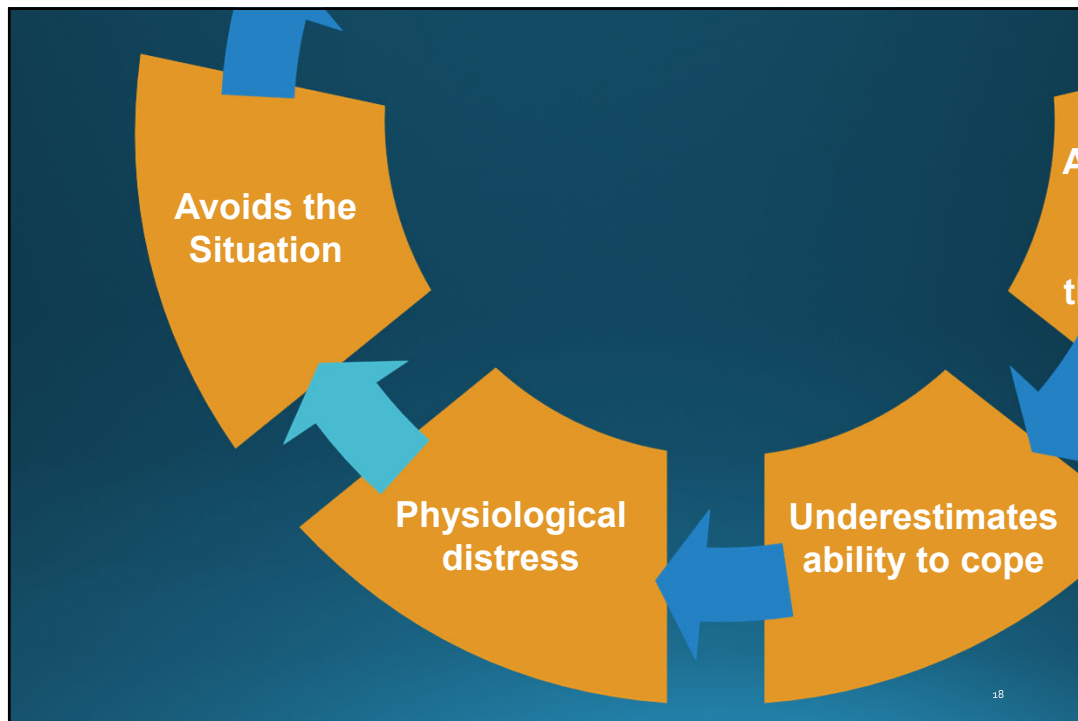
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Example: Parent Conversation

- “I heard that some parents were getting together to plan some virtual after-school activities to help parents that work. But my kids aren’t motivated to do anything. And I can’t get them to.”
- “I’m pretty sure I’m the only one who had trouble with the dashboard. I’m terrible with computers.”
- “I failed miserably at this in the spring. And that was AFTER my kids had been getting real instruction all year. Now, I will never be able to keep them on track.”

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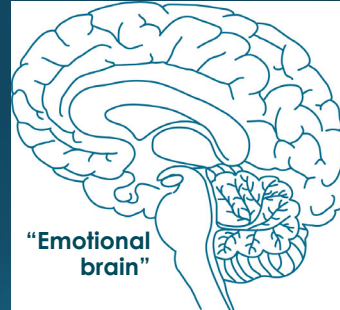


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THE STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM

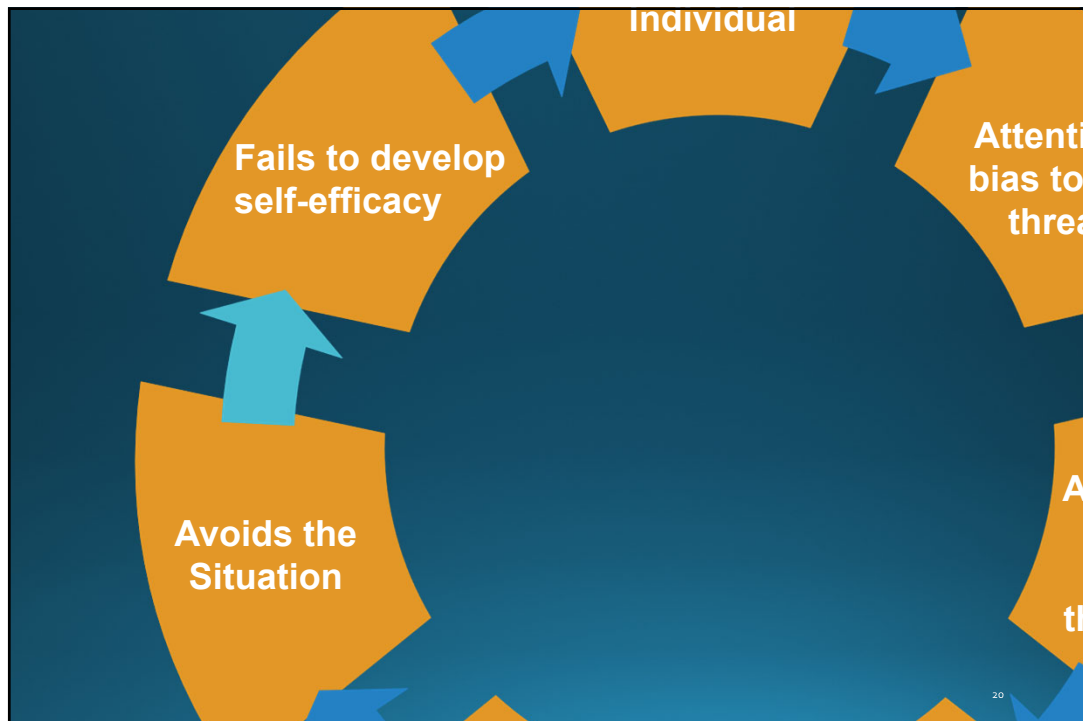
1. The brainstem detects that "This is a problem!"
2. Amygdala senses threat and sets off the alarm.
3. Thinking brain goes off-line. Emotional brain takes over and activates fight, flight or freeze response.
4. Goal: Thinking brain helps shut off the alarm and helps us to calm down.



Guarino, K. & Chagnon, E. (2018). Trauma-sensitive schools training package. Washington, DC: National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments.

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References

- Avery, E., & Park, S. (2016). Effects of crisis efficacy on intentions to follow directives during crisis. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 28*(2), 72-86.
- Beck, A. T., & Clark, D. A. (1997). An information processing model of anxiety: Automatic and strategic processes. *Behaviour research and therapy, 35*(1), 49-58.
- Mathews, A., & Mackintosh, B. (2000). Induced emotional interpretation bias and anxiety. *Journal of abnormal psychology, 109*(4), 602.
- US Department of Health and Human Services. Communicating in a crisis: risk communication guidelines for public officials. 2002. US Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, DC.

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How can you guess someone's avoiding the stressor?

- You send an email but they _____.
- You get a response that's _____.
- They make _____.
- Things get worse, not _____.
- They focus on something that's _____ instead.
- They sound like a broken _____.
- They focus not on what they can control but on what they _____.
- They tell themselves _____.

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What's self efficacy and why is it important during a crisis?

"Over the past three decades, Bandura's (1977) construct of self-efficacy, or the perceived ability to perform an action to achieve a specific outcome, has persisted as one of the strongest predictors of behavior." (Avery & Park, 2016, p. 73)

Question: Why is it important to us that parents have self-efficacy? What do we want them to feel competent *about*?

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Let's review our opportunities to stop this cycle.



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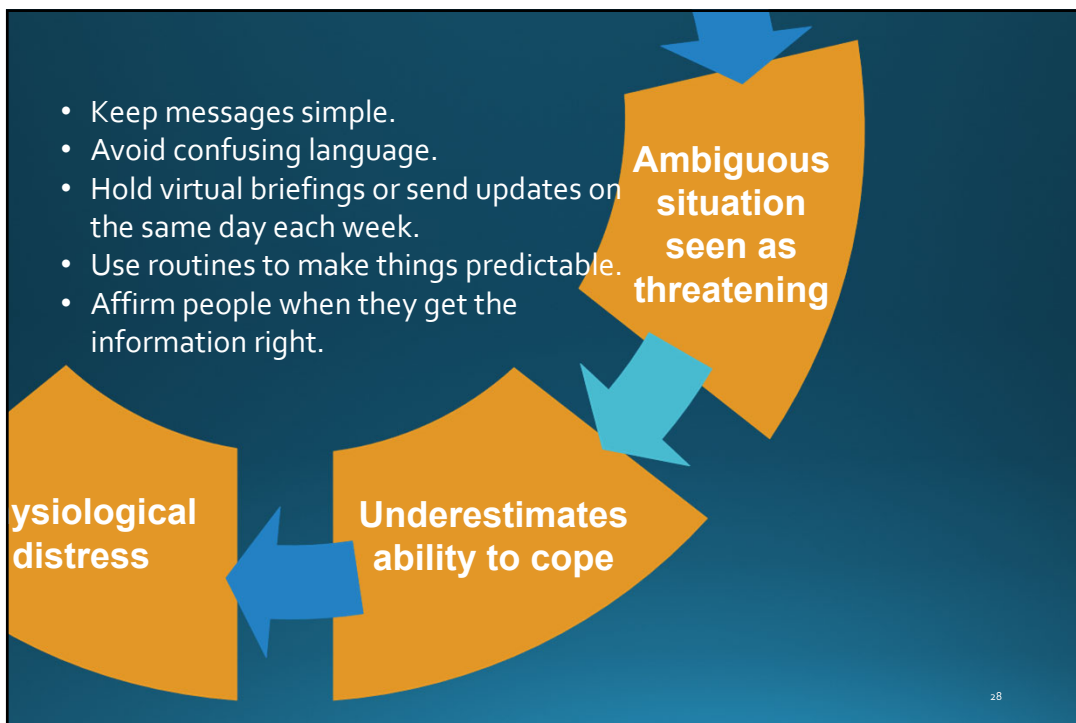
Beck & Clark, 1997; Mathews & Mackintosh, 2000

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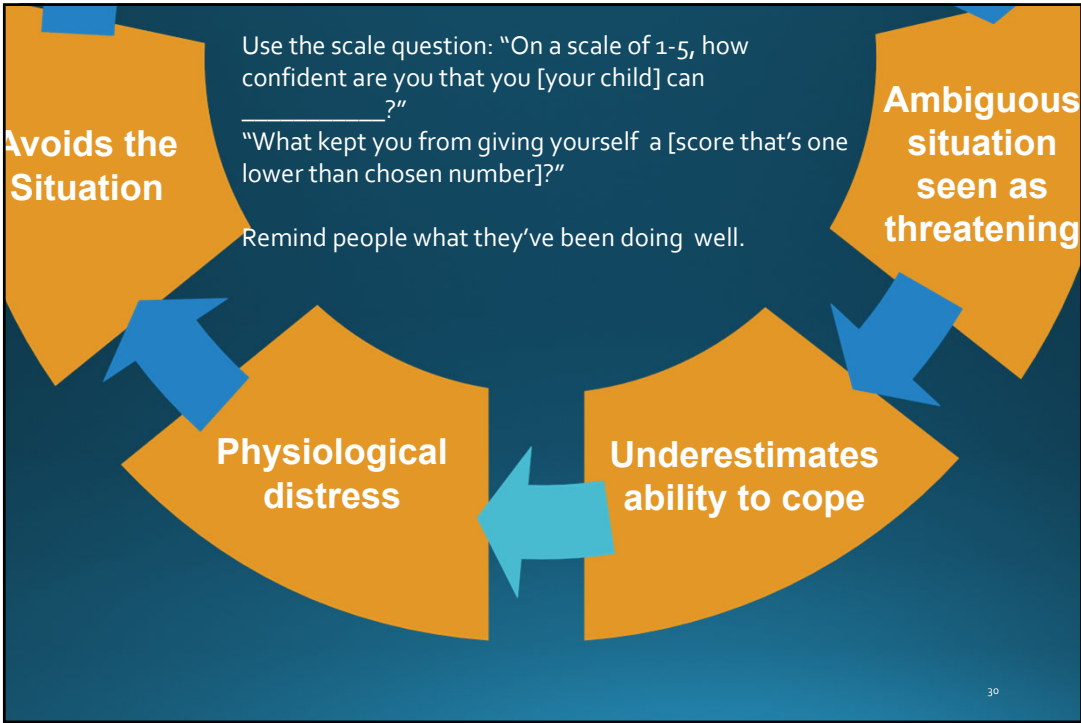
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Readability Statistics ? X

Counts	
Words	190
Characters	1,100
Paragraphs	2
Sentences	7
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	3.5
Words per Sentence	21.5
Characters per Word	5.7
Readability	
Flesch Reading Ease	31.9
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	14.1
Passive Sentences	57.1%

OK

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How can we apply all this to improve our district's communications?



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The CERC Rhythm

Engage Community • Empower Decision-Making • Evaluate

Preparation

- Draft and test messages
- Develop partnerships
- Create plans
- Determine approval process

Initial

- Express empathy
- Explain risks
- Promote action
- Describe response efforts

Maintenance

- Explain ongoing risks
- Segment audiences
- Provide background information
- Address rumors

Resolution

- Motivate vigilance
- Discuss lessons learned
- Revise plan

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The Six Principles of CERC

Throughout these chapters, six principles of effective emergency and risk communications are emphasized:

- 1 Be First:**
Crises are time-sensitive. Communicating information quickly is crucial. For members of the public, the first source of information often becomes the preferred source.
- 2 Be Right:**
Accuracy establishes credibility. Information can include what is known, what is not known, and what is being done to fill in the gaps.
- 3 Be Credible:**
Honesty and truthfulness should not be compromised during crises.
- 4 Express Empathy:**
Crises create harm, and the suffering should be acknowledged in words. Addressing what people are feeling, and the challenges they face, builds trust and rapport.
- 5 Promote Action:**
Giving people meaningful things to do calms anxiety, helps restore order, and promotes some sense of control!
- 6 Show Respect:**
Respectful communication is particularly important when people feel vulnerable. Respectful communication promotes cooperation and rapport.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). *Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication (CERC)*.


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CERC Templates and Tools

[CERC Pandemic Influenza Manual \(PDF\)](#) [PDF - 665K]

[Staffing Planning Worksheet](#) [PDF - 665K]

[By Leaders for Leaders \(PDF\)](#) [PDF - 578K]

[Special Populations Assessment](#) [PDF - 578K]

[Event Assessment Wizard](#) [PDF - 233K]

[Anticipated Questions Tool](#) [PDF - 233K]

[CERC Rubric](#) [PDF - 300K]

[CERC Plan Checklist](#) [PDF - 175K]

[CERC Message Template](#) [PDF - 168K]

[News Release Template](#) [PDF - 166K]

[First 48 Hours Checklist](#) [PDF - 193K]

[Message Development for Communication Worksheet](#) [PDF - 57K]

[CERC Assessment Tool](#) [PDF - 376K]

[Event Response and Assessment](#) [PDF - 148K]

[CERC Basic Tenets](#) [PDF - 385K]

[CERC Engaging the Community with Credibility](#) [PDF - 554K]

[Sample Message Planning](#) [PDF - 218K]

[Immediate Response Checklist](#) [PDF - 191K]

[Personal Report of Communication Apprehension](#)

<https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/resources/templates-tools.asp>

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CERC wallet card

Prepare to Answer These Questions:

- Are my family and I safe?
- What can I do to protect myself and my family?
- Who is in charge here?
- What can we expect?
- Why did this happen?
- Were you forewarned?
- Why wasn't this prevented?
- What else can go wrong?
- When did you begin working on this?
- What does this information mean?

Stay on Message:

- "What's important is to remember..."
- "I can't answer that question, but I can tell you..."
- "Before I forget, I want to tell your viewers..."
- "Let me put that in perspective..."

Be First. Be Right. Be Credible.

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Five pitfalls to avoid

1. Mixed messages from multiple experts
2. Information released late
3. Paternalistic attitudes
4. Not countering rumors and myths in real-time
5. Public power struggles and confusion

An illustration on a teal background shows a person in a red suit running from left to right. The path is a dashed white line that dips into five circular holes of varying depths. The person is currently stepping on the edge of the fourth hole. The entire illustration is enclosed in a white border.

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The message for educators

“Ignoring communication until after a crisis has occurred allows others to frame the crisis for themselves. When that happens, organizations are disadvantaged in their crisis response.”

Source: Payne, H. J., Jerome, A. M., Thompson, B., & Mazer, J. P. (2018). Relationship building and message planning: An exploration of media challenges and strategies used during school crises at the P-12 level. *Public Relations Review*, p. 2.

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- Avery, E., & Park, S. (2016). Effects of crisis efficacy on intentions to follow directives during crisis. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 28*(2), 72-86.
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