



## Guide to the Psychology of a Crisis



# Psychology of a Crisis

## We'll cover:

1. Four ways people process information during a crisis
2. Mental states in a crisis
3. Behaviours in a crisis
4. Risk perception
5. How we can help you



Crises, emergencies, and disasters happen. Disasters are different from personal and family emergencies, and not just because they are larger in scale. Disasters that take a toll on human life are characterized by change, high levels of uncertainty, and complexity.

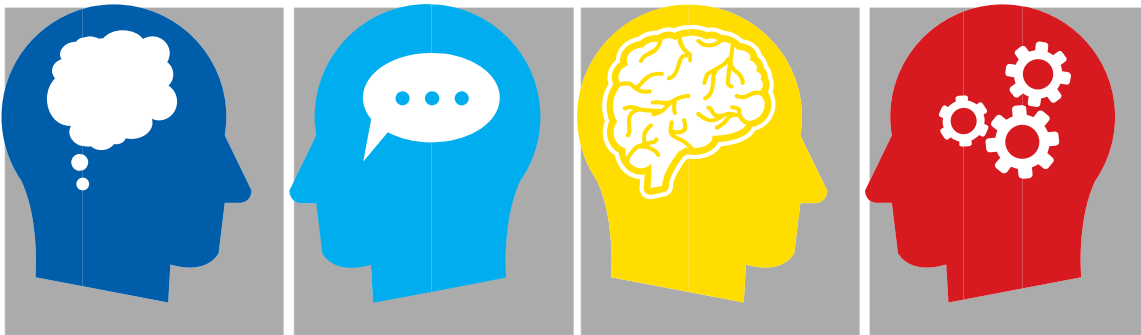
In a crisis, affected people take in information, process information, and act on information differently than they would during non-crisis times. People or groups may exaggerate their communication responses. They may revert to more basic or instinctive fight-or-flight reasoning.

Effective communication during a crisis is not an attempt at mass mental therapy, nor is it a magic potion that fixes all problems. Nonetheless, to reduce the psychological impact of a crisis, the team should feel empowered to take actions that will reduce their risk of harm.

We'll briefly describe how people process information differently during a crisis, the mental states and behaviours that tend to emerge in crises, how psychological effects are different in each phase of a crisis, and how to communicate to best reach people during these changing states of mind.

## 1. Four Ways People Process Information during a Crisis

By understanding how people take in information during a crisis state, we can better plan to communicate.



### We simplify messages.

Under intense stress and possible information overload, we tend to miss the nuances messages by doing the following:

- Not fully hearing information because of our inability to juggle multiple facts during a crisis.
- Not remembering as much of the information as we normally could.
- Misinterpreting confusing action messages.

Use simple messages.

## We hold on to current beliefs.

To cope, many of us may not attempt a logical and reasoned approach to decision making. Instead, we may rely on habits and long-held practices. We might follow bad examples set by others.

Crisis communication sometimes requires asking people to do something that seems counterintuitive, such as evacuating even when the weather looks calm. Changing our beliefs during a crisis may be difficult. Beliefs are often held very strongly and not easily altered. We tend not to seek evidence that contradicts beliefs we already hold.

We also tend to exploit any conflicting or unclear messages about a subject by interpreting it as consistent with existing beliefs. Faced with new risks in an emergency, we may have to rely on experts with whom we have little or no experience.

Often, reputable experts disagree regarding the level of threat, risks, and appropriate advice. The tendency of experts to offer opposing views leaves many of us with increased uncertainty and fear. We may be more likely to take advice from a trusted source with which we are familiar, even if this source does not have emergency-related expertise and provides inaccurate information.

Messages should come from a credible source.

## We look for additional information and opinions.

We remember what we see and tend to believe what we've experienced. During crises, we want messages confirmed before taking action. You may find that you are likely to do the following:

- See if the same warning is being repeated elsewhere.
- Try to call friends and colleagues to see if others have heard the same messages.
- Turn to a known and credible local leader for advice.
- Check multiple social media channels to see what our contacts are saying.

Use consistent messages.

## We believe the first message

During a crisis, the speed of a response can be an important factor in reducing negative impact. In the absence of information, we may begin to speculate and fill in the blanks. This often results in rumors.

Each of us may believe the accepted message, even though more accurate information may follow. When new, perhaps more complete information becomes available, we compare it to the first messages we heard.

Because of the ways we process information while under stress, when communicating with someone facing a crisis or disaster, messages should be **simple, credible, and consistent**. Speed is also very important when communicating in an emergency. An effective message must do the following:

- Be repeated.
- Come from multiple credible sources.
- Be specific to the emergency being experienced.
- Offer a positive course of action that can be executed.

Release accurate messages as soon as possible.

## 2. Mental States in a Crisis



During a crisis, people may experience a wide range of emotions. Psychological barriers can interfere with cooperation. Crisis leaders should expect certain patterns, as described below, and understand that these patterns affect communication.

There are several psychological barriers that could interfere with cooperation. A communicator can mitigate many of the following reactions by acknowledging these feelings in words, expressing empathy, and being honest

### Uncertainty

Unfortunately, there are more questions than answers during a crisis, especially in the beginning. At that time, the full magnitude of the crisis, the cause of the disaster, and the actions that people can take to protect themselves may be unclear. This uncertainty will challenge even the greatest communicator.

To reduce their anxiety, people seek out information to determine their options and confirm or disconfirm their beliefs. They may choose a familiar source of information over a less familiar source, regardless of the accuracy of the provided information.<sup>7</sup> They may discount information that is distressing or overwhelming.

Many leaders and leaders have been taught to sound confident even when they are uncertain. While this may inspire trust, there is a potential for overconfidence, which can backfire. It is important to remember that an over-reassured team isn't the goal. You want people to be concerned, remain vigilant, and take all the right precautions.

**Acknowledge uncertainty.** Acknowledge and express empathy for your audience's uncertainty and share with them the process you are using to get more information about the evolving situation. This will help people to manage their anxiety. Use statements such as, "I can't tell you today what's causing people in our town to die so suddenly, but I can tell you what we're doing to find out. Here's the first step..."

#### **Tell them**

- What you know.
- What you don't know.
- What process you are using to get answers.

Although we can hope for certain outcomes, we often cannot promise that they will occur. Instead of offering a promise outside of your absolute control, such as "we're all going to be fine," promise something you can be sure that response leaders will do, such as "we're going to throw everything we have at this"

A danger early in a crisis, especially if you're responsible for fixing the problem, is to promise an outcome outside your control. Never make a promise, no matter how heartfelt, unless it's in your absolute power to deliver.

## **Fear, Anxiety, and Dread**

In a crisis, people in may feel fear, anxiety, confusion, and intense dread. As leaders, our job is not to make these feelings go away. Instead, you could acknowledge them in a statement of empathy. You can use a statement like, "we've never faced anything like this before in our organisation and it can be frightening."

Fear is an important psychological consideration in the response to a threat. Bear in mind the following aspects of fear:

- In some cases, a perceived threat can motivate and help people take desired actions.
- In other cases, fear of the unknown or fear of uncertainty may be the most debilitating of the psychological responses to disasters and prevent people from taking action.
- When people are afraid, and do not have adequate information, they may react in inappropriate ways to avoid the threat.

Leaders can help by portraying an accurate assessment of the level of danger and providing action messages, so that affected people do not feel helpless.

## Hopelessness and Helplessness

Avoiding hopelessness and helplessness is a vital communication objective during a crisis. **Hopelessness** is the feeling that nothing can be done by anyone to make the situation better. People may accept that a threat is real, but that threat may loom so large that they feel the situation is hopeless. **Helplessness** is the feeling that people have that they, themselves, have no power to improve their situation or protect themselves. If a person feels helpless to protect him- or herself, he or she may withdraw mentally or physically.

According to psychological research, if organisation members let their feelings of fear, anxiety, confusion, and dread grow unchecked during a crisis, they will most likely begin to feel hopeless or helpless. If this happens, organisation members will be less motivated and less able to take action.

Instead of trying to eliminate an organisation's emotional responses to the crisis, help organisation members manage their negative feelings by setting them on a course of action. Taking an action during a crisis can help to restore a sense of control and overcome feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Helping the team feel empowered and in control of at least some parts of their lives may also reduce fear.



As much as possible, advise people to take actions that are constructive and directly relate to the crisis they're facing. These actions may be symbolic, such as putting up a flag or preparatory, such as creating a family or team check-in plan.

## Denial

Denial refers to the act of refusing to acknowledge either imminent harm or harm that has already occurred. It occurs for a variety of reasons:

- People may not have received enough information to recognize the threat.
- They may assume the situation is not as bad as it really is because they have not heard the most recent warnings, didn't understand what they were told, or only heard part of a message.
- They may have received messages about a threat but not received action messages on how people should respond to the threat.
- They may receive and understand the message but behave as if the danger is not as great as they are being told. For example, people may get tired of evacuating for threats that prove harmless, which can cause people to deny the seriousness of future threats.

When people doubt a threat is real, they may seek further confirmation. With some organisations, this confirmation may involve additional factors, such as the following:

- A need to consult organisation leaders or experts for specific opinions.
- The desire to first know how others are responding.
- The possibility that the warning message of the threat is so far outside the person's experience that he or she simply can't make sense of it—or just chooses to ignore it.

Denial can, at least in part, be prevented or addressed with clear, consistent communication from a trusted source. If your audience receives and understands a consistent message from multiple trusted sources, they will be more likely to believe that message and act on it.

## What about Panic?

Contrary to what you may see in the movies, people seldom act completely irrationally during a crisis. During an emergency, people absorb and act on information differently from nonemergency situations. This is due, in part, to the fight-or-flight mechanism.

The natural drive to take some action in response to a threat is sometime described as the fight or flight response. Emergencies create threats to our health and safety that can create severe anxiety, stress, and the need to do something. Adrenaline, a primary stress hormone, is activated in threatening situations. This hormone produces several responses, including increased heart rate, narrowed blood vessels, and expanded air passages. In general, these responses enhance people's physical capacity to respond to a threatening situation. One response is to flee the threat. If fleeing is not an option or is exhausted as a strategy, a fight response is activated. You cannot predict whether someone will choose fight-or-flight in a given situation.

These rational reactions to a crisis, particularly when at the extreme ends of fight-or-flight, are often described erroneously as "panic". You may be concerned that people will collectively "panic" by disregarding official instructions and creating chaos, particularly in team places. This is also unlikely to occur.

If response leaders describe survival behaviours as "panic," they will alienate their audience. Almost no one believes he or she is panicking because people understand the rational thought process behind their actions, even if that rationality is hidden to spectators. Instead, leaders should acknowledge people's desire to take protective steps, redirect them to actions they can take, and explain why the unwanted behaviour is potentially harmful to them or the organisation. Leaders can appeal to people's sense of organisation to help them resist unwanted actions focused on individual protection.

In addition, a lack of information or conflicting information from authorities is likely to create heightened anxiety and emotional distress. If you start hedging or hiding the bad news, you increase the risk of a confused, angry, and uncooperative team.

### 3. Behaviours in a Crisis



Proper crisis communication can address a variety of potentially harmful behaviours during a crisis. Although it may be difficult to measure the impact, using good communication to persuade people to avoid negative behaviours during a crisis will lessen the misery people experience. Some of these negative behaviours are listed here, with advice on communication strategies to address them

Some people will attempt to bypass official channels to get special treatment or access to what they want.

This behaviour may result from the following:

- A person's sense of privilege.
- A belief that leaders cannot guarantee the person's well-being.
- An inflated need to be in control.
- A lack of awareness of available resources.

Whatever the cause, seeking special treatment can be damaging to the harmony and recovery of the organisation. If there is a perception that favoured people get special help, it invites anger among organisation members and chaos when resources are made available.

Good communication can reduce some of these reactions. The more honest and open leaders are about resources, the better odds of reducing the urge among people in the organisation to seek special treatment. The following communication strategies can help leaders persuade the team to avoid seeking special treatment:

- Explain what resources such as financial and IT resources are available.
- Explain why some resources are not available.
- Explain that limited resources are being used for people with the greatest need.
- Explain who the people are with the greatest need.
- Describe reasonable actions that people can take, so that they do not focus on things they cannot have.
- Keep open records of who receives what and when. Remember, both people directly affected by the crisis and those who anticipate being affected by the crisis need enough information to help them manage anxiety and avoid behaviours that may divide the organisation.

## Negative Behaviours

Without communication from a source that is trusted by the audience to lessen the psychological impact, negative emotions may lead to harmful individual or group behaviours. These behaviours may affect the team's safety by slowing the speed, quality, and appropriateness of a crisis response and recovery. Harmful actions may include the following:

- Misallocating resources based on demand rather than need.
- Accusations of providing preferential treatment and bias.
- Creating and spreading damaging rumours directed at people or products.
- Offering unfounded predictions of greater negative impact.
- Encouraging an unfair distrust of the organisation.
- Depending on special relationships to ensure considerations based on desire, not need.

People in a crisis tend to have more unexplained physical symptoms. Stress caused by a crisis will give some people physical symptoms, such as headaches, muscle aches, stomach upsets, and low-grade fevers.

## Positive Behaviours



Crises do not only create negative emotions and behaviours. Positive responses might include coping, altruism, relief, and elation at surviving the crisis. Feelings of excitement, greater self-worth, strength, and growth may come from the experience. Often a crisis results in changes in the way the future is viewed, including a

Many of these positive feelings associated with a successful crisis outcome depend on effective management and communication. Positive responses may include the following:

- Relief and elation.
- Sense of strength and empowerment.
- New understanding of risk and change management.
- New resources and skills for risk management.
- Renewed sense of organisation.
- Opportunities for growth and renewal.

## 4. Risk Perception



Not all risks are perceived equally. Risk perception can be thought of as a combination of **hazard**, the technical or scientific measure of a risk, and **outrage**, the emotions that the risk evokes. Risk perception is not about numbers alone.

**Don't dismiss outrage.** A mistake often made is to measure the magnitude of the crisis only based on how many people are financially hurt or how much property is destroyed. Remember that we must also measure in another way: the level of emotional trauma associated with it.

As a communicator, expect greater team outrage and more demands for information if what causes the risk is intentional and targeted. Unfairly distributed, unfamiliar, catastrophic, and immoral events create long-lasting mental health effects that lead to anger, frustration, helplessness, fear, and a desire for revenge. A wide body of research exists on issues surrounding risk communication, but the following explains how some risks are more accepted than others:

- **Voluntary versus involuntary:** Voluntary risks are more readily accepted than imposed risks. *Example: unpaid sabbatical v. layoff.*
- **Familiar versus new:** Familiar risks are more readily accepted than unfamiliar risks. *Example: seasonal layoff v. first time redundancy.*
- **Natural origin versus manmade:** Risks generated by nature are better tolerated than risks generated by man or institution. *Example: covid 19 v. biased leaders.*
- **Reversible versus permanent:** Reversible risk is better tolerated than risk perceived to be irreversible. *Example: salary reduction v. redundancy.*
- **Time:** Change spread over time at a predictable rate is better tolerated than immediate change.
- **Fairly distributed versus unfairly distributed:** Risks that do not appear to single out a person, team or division are better tolerated than risks that are perceived to be targeted.
- **High trust versus low trust organisation:** Risks generated by a highly trusted organisations are better tolerated, it's down to your track record pre the crisis and referencing other trusted organisations or recognised best in class processes.
- **Adults versus children:** Risks that affect adults are better tolerated than risks that affect children. *Example: redundancy for a single person v. those with children.*
- **Understood benefit versus questionable benefit:** Risks with well-understood potential benefit and the reduction of well-understood negative impact are better tolerated than risks with little or no perceived benefit or negative impact.

## 5. How we can help you

- Bring non-judgemental and specialist support at times of crisis from people who understand the impact it may have
- Identify and then quantify the issues from the perspectives of everyone involved as we are in a position to highlight any blind spots in thinking
- Provide positive and practical strategies for clients
- Be a trusted partner for leaders who want get help with important challenges

### Strategy Workshops

- **Share best practices**  
Run ideation in line with best practices.
- **Deep dive on critical areas**  
Develop a detailed plan with milestones

### Support Implementation

- **Facilitate reviews**  
Restructuring and progress reviews.
- **Access and recruit key people**  
Internal / external hires, interims, and consultants
- **Upskilling key people.**

### Post Crisis Planning

- **Workshop on scenario planning**  
Revenues, costs, current customer needs.
- **Facilitate review of opportunities.**  
Growth through new customer needs and products. Potential acquisitions.



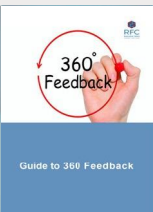
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## Robert Ferry Profile

Robert has over 20 years' experience in the executive search and leadership coaching acting as a trusted advisor to a wide range of Irish and multinational clients. He holds a B.A. in HR and an MSc. in Coaching Psychology.

Many organisations use his expertise when they need to find or coach leaders for their organisations.



### Current role

Robert is the founding director of RFC Leading Talent which was established in 1998. He is responsible for leading the team in delivering talent solutions, search and coaching for middle to senior level executives through to board directors. He represents the firm as the Irish branch of CFR Global Executive Search and leads the global industrial and engineering practice.

### Earlier Career

He began his career in NCB Stockbrokers as a private client advisor. He then moved to join a leading specialist firm, Professional Placement Group, as a recruitment consultant covering accounting and financial services professionals. He progressed to director level leading the technical team which specialised in engineering and supply chain supply chain professionals and managers, a role he held for over six years until 1998.

**Contact Robert Ferry to learn how we can help you manage in a crisis.**

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