

Unit Eight: Disaster Communication

I. Unit Overview and Objectives

A. Unit Overview

1. This unit will explore how the form and function of communication is impacted by the circumstances of a disaster.
2. Four major systems of communication (oral, written, non-verbal, and listening) can be utilized to express messages between people. This unit will examine when, where, and how reliance on these forms change and can be adapted to create clear messages.
3. Flexibility is key to effective disaster communication. Keeping messages simple, consistent, will be stressed in this unit. Additionally it will emphasize how communication should be based on the needs of the relationship between the survivors, responders and community experiencing the disaster.

B. Unit Objectives

1. By listening, participating and interacting in class activities, by the end of Unit Eight participants should be able to accurately:
 - a. Describe how a disaster can interrupt the taken-for-granted nature of personal communication networks.
 - b. List the four major types of communication that can be utilized during a crisis for the benefit of survivors, responders and the community.
 - c. Display an ability to be flexible in your communication form in order to get across simple messages in class activities that simulate disaster situations.

II. The forms and functions of communication during a time of disaster

A. In a time of disaster everything can be in a disastrous state:

1. the land
2. the community
3. family and friends
4. homes
5. access to food
6. access to cash or credit
7. transportation
8. employment
9. social services
10. the list is incomplete and can be quite lengthy . . .

B. Along with such concrete elements, intangible elements like personal communication networks are in disarray. Communications technologies such as phones, faxes and computer lines may easy to identify and repair; personal communication networks are not so easy to reestablish. People may or may not have access to their loved ones, and they usually don't have access to individuals who are not in their immediate family. Those people or groups are also an important way people gather and share information, on an informal everyday basis, consider:

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Form and Function of Disaster Communication (continued)

1. a town hall meeting
2. friends you spoke to at work
3. the person from whom you bought morning coffee
4. the postal worker you said 'hello' to
5. the local man who caught you up on neighborhood gossip
6. your friends at the dog park
7. your book club
8. service or community organizations
9. religious or faith based communities
10. the list is incomplete and can be quite lengthy . . .

Individuals and groups with whom people engage in everyday talk are now displaced and the taken-for-granted nature of communication is exposed. In modern western culture people expect communication with family and friends as well as business and government to be immediate. A disaster destroys not only the technology that provides those services, but displaces people's interpersonal relationships.

This can place great stress on individuals as they attempt to understand the disaster and reconstruct the relationships of their daily lives.

C. Personal skills used by individuals may be interrupted by the disaster. Although training and preparation can help avoid personal injury during a disaster, physical harm can happen to anyone from a random person on the street to the most highly trained emergency management personnel. Imagine how you would have to adapt if your primary form of communication was no longer available to you (to either send or receive information). Consider:

- Loosing your voice (if you are a speaking person)
- Breaking your hands (if you use American Sign Language)
- Being separated from your interpreter (if you speak English as a second language)

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Form and Function of Disaster Communication (continued)

Just like society takes for granted the instant nature of communication technology, most people take for granted that their primary form of personal communication will always be available and functional. Even more so, people often assume that others will adapt to them when communicating. Disasters can put everything in disarray, even a persons system of personal communication. Human bodies can get harmed, and with that physical systems of communication can falter and fail. Consider:

- What is your primary form of communication?
- How would you feel if it was no longer available to you?
- How might you adapt and communicate without it?

III. Four major systems of personal communication

Although there are many ways of communicating beyond the four covered in this chapter, these categories are detailed because they stress interpersonal communication skills. They are the type of communication skills most helpful for those interacting with others at the time of a disaster.

A. Oral communication (talk) uses sound to form words (then the words form sentences to express thoughts and ideas in spoken format). Many things can affect the use of oral communication such as culture, physical capacity, language and many other elements. Consider:

1. In Western cultures talk is viewed as desirable and people use it for social purposes and for performing tasks. Silence is considered a negative value. Westerners are more uncomfortable with silence and can find it awkward or embarrassing. When someone is silent people often interpret the behavior as a lack of interest, an unwillingness to communicate, hostility, shyness or a sign of interpersonal incompatibility.
2. In some other cultures talk is perceived differently, silence is more valued. Rather than base relationships on talk a talkative person is often considered a show-off or insincere. Remaining quiet is considered the proper state when there is nothing to be said.

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Four Forms of Communication (continued)

3. Then there are those who do not have the physical capacity (or have limited capacity) for oral communication and use other means to communicate. In addition, rather than speech being an issue their primary language might be different from yours. Even a recent physical injury or illness can have a bearing on an individual's ability to effectively use oral communication.
4. These different views of talk and silence and the capacity for speech or language can lead to communication problems when people who utilize oral communication differently interact. Only when people recognize different standards of behavior can they adapt to one another or at least understand and respect their differences. Failure to recognize these differences can lead to unfortunate and unnecessary misunderstandings.
5. In a disaster those with CERT training may use oral communication to speak to individuals or small groups, it may be part of your triage assessment or how you provide feedback to members of the emergency management community.
Tips for effective oral communication include:

- Think before you speak; organize your thoughts.
- Do not speak just to fill time
- Be clear and concise
- Articulate sounds
- Regulate your tone and pitch as needed
- Avoid using contractions and acronyms
- Pay attention to how the receiver of your speech is responding and be willing and able to adapt to their needs, utilizing some other form of communication when it is necessary

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Four Forms of Communication (continued)

B. Written Communication is the use of an alphabet to communicate by inscribing or engraving marks on some element; like putting pen to paper. Some written communication is formal such as report writing, other is informal, such as the use of notes or symbols, this unit will examine both.

1. Formal written communication is often one-way communication (communication without immediate feedback between the sender and receiver). For instance when a person writes a report and sends it off to another. In this case the writer may not have the ability to explain what she intended to the reader. The best writing is clear and simple to read. If sentences or paragraphs get too long, or if words are too sophisticated, meaning can be lost.
2. CERT members who work on a team will often have to report on their daily and weekly activities in written format. Keep these things in mind for more effective formal writing:
 - Keep sentences short
 - Paragraphs are limited to one topic only
 - Use fact not opinion
 - Do not infer; be direct
 - Be clear and concise
 - Do not use inappropriate language
 - Limit your use of acronyms
 - Your written material is public domain, be professional
3. Informal written communication can be either one-way or two-way communication. If written communication is two-way can involve immediate feedback between the sender and receiver of the communication. For example, writing someone a note with a check box next to his or her response options.

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Four Forms of Communication (continued)

Informal written communication may be one-way as well. For example, recall the use of symbols in light search and rescue that indicate if someone is in the building, or has been removed from the premises

Because a disaster can impact a persons primary form of communication, or because many individuals do not utilize speech or have the capacity to hear, written communication may be used as a tool to substitute for speech.

4. Consider the following application for informal written communication during a disaster. Someone you find during light search and rescue cannot speak. One way to assess if she is hurt is to write the word 'HURT?' and show it to her. If she can read English she may be able to point to where her pain is located. When using informal written communication keep in mind the following:

- Bring something to write with to CERT events
e.g. Magic Markers, Sharpie Markers, Pencils, Chalk
- Be flexible and adaptable with writing instruments
If you need to, write in the dirt with a stick,
Use lipstick or grease on a table to write with
- Keep written communication short
'HURT?' is more efficient than 'can you tell me if you are hurt?'
'WHERE?' is more efficient that 'please point to the location of your pain'

C. Non-verbal Communication – Messages expressed by means other than spoken words are considered non-verbal or visual communication. A person's sight must be functioning to perceive visual communication (such as insignias, color or gestures) or the visual communication can be explained, described or perceived by other feedback forms.

1. Visual communication can include
 - How a person is dressed
 - How space is used while communicating
 - Use of color
 - Body gestures

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Four Forms of Communication (continued)

2. Non-verbal communication does not need sight to be perceived, it can include:
 - The use of time
 - How a voice tone is regulated or accented
 - How fast or slow a person speaks
 - The use of touch

3. Consider the following application for visual communication during a disaster. Someone you find during light search and rescue is hurt but cannot speak. One way to assess his pain is to use the Wong-Baker FACES pain rating scale¹ (found on the following page).

This is a pain scale utilized by the medical profession. It uses a rating system from of either 1-5 or 1-10 to assess patient pain (1 = low pain through 10 = extreme pain).

Rather than words, it uses symbols of faces. It has application for children who may not have the articulation skills to express pain levels, people who do not speak English as their first language, individuals who have temporarily lost their speech, or with people who do not speak.

¹ <http://www3.us.elsevierhealth.com/WOW/> (accessed September 6, 2005)

Wong, D.L., Hockenberry-Eaton, M., Wilson, D., Winkelstein, M., Schwartz, P.: [Whaley and Wong's Essentials of Pediatric Nursing](#), 5th edition, St. Louis, 2001, Mosby, p. 1301.

Wong, D.L., Hockenberry-Eaton, M., Wilson, D., Winkelstein, M.L., Ahmann, E., DiVito-Thomas, P.A.: [Whaley and Wong's Nursing Care of Infants and Children](#), 6th edition, St. Louis, 1999, p. 2040.

Wong, D.L. & Hess, C.S.: [Wong and Whaley's Clinical Manual of Pediatric Nursing](#), 5th edition, St. Louis, 2000, Mosby, p. 326.

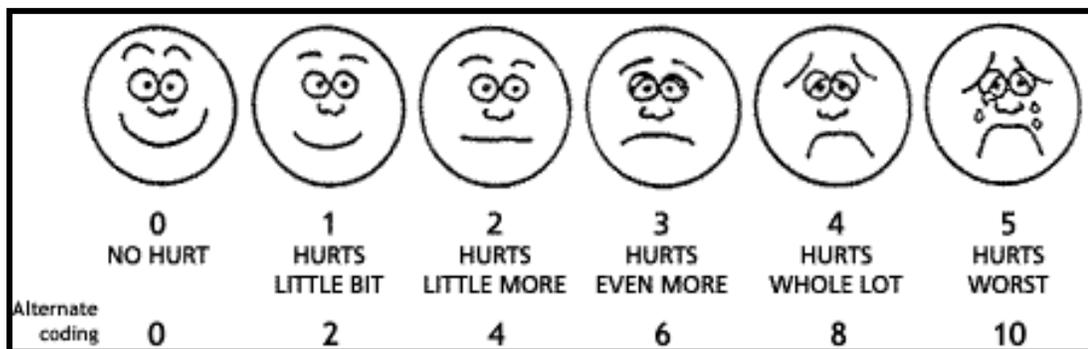
Wong, D.L.: [Pediatric Quick Reference](#), 3rd edition, St. Louis, 2000, Mosby, p. 24

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Chart One Wong-Baker FACES pain rating scale



The Wong-Baker FACES pain rating scale uses symbols of faces that range from #1 a smiling face, through #5 a frowning face with tears coming from the eyes. People in pain are shown the chart and then are expected to point to the face that most represents their level of pain at the time. The chart also offers alternate coding so a pain scale of 1 through 10 may be substituted.

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Four Forms of Communication (continued)

D. Listening is a form of communication that consists of several elements attending, understanding, responding and remembering.

1. Attending is a psychological process. For some it is the act of hearing a message, for others it is the process of receiving a message in a visual format (like sign language). People would go crazy if they attended to every sound or gesture in the environment, so they filter out some messages and attend to others (listen to them). Some messages are filtered for people by not speaking clearly or having a face blocked so lips cannot be read.
2. Understanding occurs when people make sense of a message. It is quite possible to hear and attend to a message without understanding it at all.
3. Responding to a messages means the listener has given observable feedback to the speaker. This can mean keeping eye contact, reacting with facial expressions, giving verbal feedback such as asking questions or exchanging ideas.
4. Remembering is the ability to recall information. People often don't remember what they listened to because it is of little interest to them, they are preoccupied, have message overload or make assumptions about where the conversation is going.

E. Improving Listening - Listening is not like breathing (an activity we do well naturally) it takes much practice to become a skill we do well. Listening can be improved through instruction and training. Here are some guidelines to better listening.

1. Talk less – you were given two ears and one mouth and should use them accordingly. Many people make the mistake of shifting a conversation to their ideas. Good listeners do exactly that; they listen! Have your focus on the person you are gathering information from.
2. Get rid of distractions – this includes internal preoccupations as well as external noise. Do everything you can to focus on the message of the sender.

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Four Forms of Communication (continued)

3. Don't judge prematurely – many people form snap judgments and evaluate others before hearing them out. Make sure you permit the sender to get all their relevant information out before you evaluate it.

There are great rewards to listening effectively. Although it takes a considerable amount of effort to listen well, getting clear and accurate information from disaster survivors is imperative to the role CERT trained individuals and teams.

IV. Exercise

Work with a partner or small group for this activity (3-4 people)

Take turns changing roles between being the community member and CERT responder.

- Have one person assume the role of an individual who is hurt because of the disaster. This person must communicate their pain to the respondent; practice doing this in several ways. First do not use your primary form of communication (e.g. if you speak, do not do that. If you use sign language, do not use that, etc.).
- The goal of the listener respondent is to accurately assess the condition of the person pretending to be hurt.
- You can make this activity more complex by changing what the person is trying to communicate. Rather than identifying pain, the person could attempt to tell the responder someone is caught in rubble, separated from their family or in need of medication.
- After the activity is complete, spend time with your partner or group deconstructing the process of communicating under these circumstances. What was the process like? How long did it take you to understand one another? When the pain or circumstances were more complex, how did that impact your ability to communicate?

Keep the following communication tips in mind

- Flexibility is key to effective disaster communication.
- Keep messages simple and consistent.
- Communication should be based on the needs of the relationship between the survivors and responders.

NEXT . . .

1. If your CERT class continues on the same day, take your break and return to this classroom.
2. If your CERT class continues on another day (next week or next month) your **Homework Assignment** is to:
 - Read and become familiar with Unit Nine: Disaster Psychology before the next session.

End of Unit Eight