

## Effective Risk Communication to Save Lives

### Staged Communication for the COVID-19 Pandemic

This guidance is intended for government public health communication specialists to show how risk communication strategies can be applied to their government’s public-facing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to provide a coordinated and staged communication approach to ultimately reduce deaths and illness and minimize disruption to daily lives in communities before, during, and after an outbreak of COVID-19.

*“One of the major lessons learned during public health events of the 21st Century—including outbreaks of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), influenza A (H1N1) and Ebola—is that risk communication and community engagement is integral to the success of responses to health emergencies.”*  
(World Health Organization, January 2020)<sup>1</sup>

Public health and social measures (PHSMs, also known as nonpharmaceutical interventions) are an accepted and time-tested strategy to delay and reduce the impact of epidemics. With no vaccine or specific treatment available as of April 2020, these measures are the first line of defense against spread of COVID-19.

Governments and communities must focus on the effective implementation of public health and social measures to reduce the burden on health systems and protect the system’s capacity to treat those who are most ill and save lives. Effective risk communication is one of the most important tools governments have for the success of these measures.

## The Role of Communication in a Pandemic

To slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people are being asked to rapidly change the way they work, live and interact both professionally and personally. Risk communication can help achieve widespread behavior change, but it must be done well to be effective. Evidence shows that if the public perceives a lack of consistency, competence, fairness, objectivity, empathy, or sincerity in crisis response, the result can be distrust and fear.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, when the public senses that a response has these positive characteristics, when information is easily understood and communicated through trusted and accessible channels,

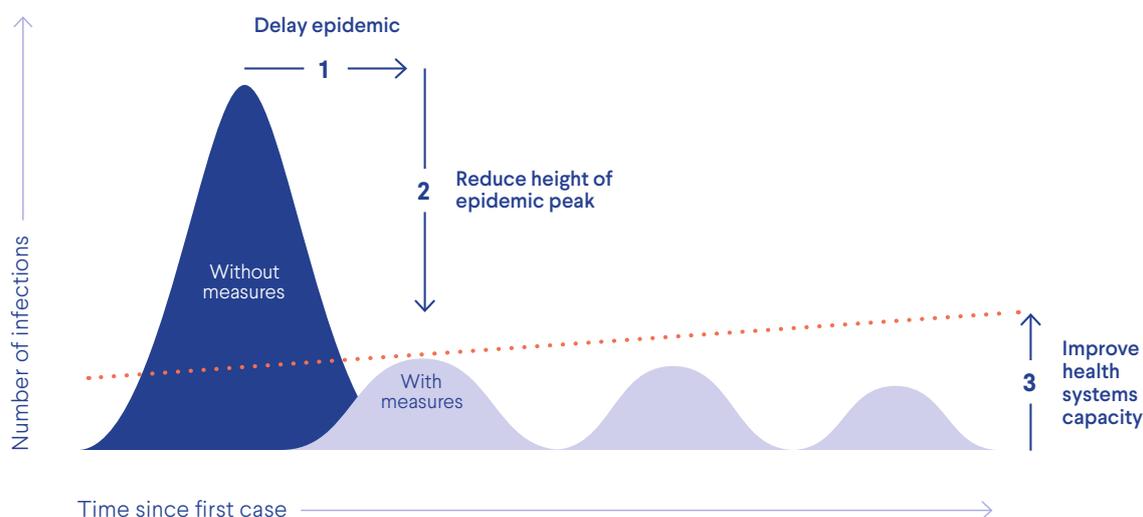
<sup>1</sup> Risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) readiness and response to the 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) [Internet]. [cited 2020 Apr 21]. Available from: <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/risk-communication-and-community-engagement-readiness-and-initial-response-for-novel-coronaviruses>

<sup>2</sup> WHO | Communicating Risk in Public Health Emergencies [Internet]. WHO. World Health Organization; [cited 2020 Mar 20]. Available from: <http://www.who.int/risk-communication/guidance/download/en/>

and when the necessary services are available, people are able to make informed choices, protect themselves, and comply with recommended practices.<sup>3</sup>

Without the introduction of PHSMs, health systems may be overwhelmed by COVID-19 cases, resulting in unnecessary deaths. When PHSMs are introduced early, and when the public (supported by good communication) adheres to them, health systems have a better chance of managing cases and saving lives (see *Figure 1*)

**FIGURE 1:**



Public trust and acceptance of PHSMs is essential to sustain community resilience and promote active participation by individuals, institutions, businesses, and public and private community partners.

The challenge for governments is to persuade and help the public to engage in the behavior changes needed to manage the crisis, and to engage other stakeholders to convey messages aligned with the government’s, so that all stakeholders are speaking with one voice as much as possible. Trust is critically important, as is promoting social cohesion—the shared values, beliefs and bonds that can engender new social norms and build support for public health and social measures. Different stages of the pandemic call for different messaging, but in all stages, communicators should follow certain key principles.

3 Betsch C, Wieler LH, Habersaat K. Monitoring behavioural insights related to COVID-19. *The Lancet*. 2020 Apr;395(10232):1255–6.

## Guiding Principles for Communication in a Crisis

### Start early. Assess population communication needs and develop a plan to meet them.

Planning should begin early, before the crisis hits your country. Establish a centralized mechanism to manage communication. If possible, conduct rapid, large-scale behavioral research to answer the most fundamental questions: Do people understand the disease (how it spreads, what the symptoms are, and how they can help slow its progress)? What do they fear most for themselves and their families? Whom do they trust? Which segments of the population are most likely to help and comply, and which are least likely? What type of countermeasures will be met with popular support, and which won't?<sup>4</sup>

If such large-scale research is not possible, conduct desk research to assess public knowledge and attitudes about COVID-19. Identify possible barriers to implementation of measures such as closures and cancellations, so that policy response and risk communication approaches can be tailored to the context.

Build relationships and coordination between government stakeholders and community leaders, identifying and leveraging existing networks. Establish a system for sharing information with key stakeholders to ensure the consistency and completeness of the information that is delivered to the public. This is the time to establish a lead organization—often the ministry of health—as a credible source of COVID-19 information for the public and media. Plan virtual press briefings or consider updates direct to the public via television and radio to share information regularly, ideally each day at the same time.

### Build trust and social cohesion.

Trust is one of the most important aspects of effective risk communication, especially in a crisis. To be trustworthy, risk communication should be transparent, truthful, timely and relevant. It must acknowledge the uncertainty associated with the crisis and the events and interventions required and indicate what is known and not known at a given time. The communication should be transparent and not hide bad news, such as rates of casualties, and include best- and worst-case scenarios.

People want a dependable and trustworthy source of communication. Identify a lead agency and key spokespeople to communicate official advice. Ensure spokespeople have the authority and the skills required to present accurate information to the public on a regular basis across appropriate media formats to make sure as many people have access to information as possible. Spokespeople need to acknowledge the difficulty of the situation as well as seek support and

<sup>4</sup> Africa must build strategies for social cohesion – and fast [Internet]. The Africa Report.com. 2020 [cited 2020 Apr 21]. Available from: <https://www.theafricareport.com/25853/coronavirus-africa-must-build-strategies-for-social-cohesion-and-fast/>

public cooperation for strong measures. Acknowledging people's fears and concerns, and the challenges they face, builds trust and rapport.

Social cohesion refers to a sense of community interconnectedness—the shared values, beliefs, bonds and the sense of responsibility that can engender appropriate social norms to withstand a crisis and build support for individual actions that benefit the society. Social cohesion can play a critical role in alleviating the effects of a crisis, especially when PHSMs are implemented. It helps people to be able to be compassionate, supportive, inclusive and invested in the well-being of their communities, and can be a strong force against stigma.

### **Communicate uncertainty.**

Respectful and truthful communication promotes cooperation and is particularly important when people feel vulnerable. Present what you know and what you don't know, be honest, and don't over-reassure. People can become even more alarmed if they don't believe they are being told the truth. Anger and skepticism can result if the situation turns out to be more serious than people were led to believe, especially if this led to reducing their ability to be as prepared as possible.

Providing anticipatory guidance and explaining how and when decisions are made is very important. This prevents people from feeling blindsided, and enables them to prepare themselves emotionally and logistically, and to, therefore, cope better when the time comes to take action.<sup>5</sup>

Create dependable channels for the public to receive official guidance (e.g., ministry of health website, regular television briefings). Though it may be more resource intensive, it is also important for the public to have direct two-way communication with health authorities, for example, a WhatsApp line for questions, radio programs to call in, or even a national toll-free hotline.

### **Explain the rationale for interventions.**

People who understand the rationale of a change in behavior are more likely to adopt it. Leaders should communicate what measures the government is planning and why each intervention is important, and explain what is being done to address possible social and economic hardships. Make clear that the course of action will be reassessed and revised as needed as conditions evolve. Recommendations must take into account the public's capacity to act, anticipating any likely barriers. They should be simple, doable and culturally appropriate.

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<sup>5</sup> Sandman PM, Lanard J. "Giving People Anticipatory Guidance." In Crisis Communication: Guidelines for Action. 2004;70. Available from: [https://psandman.com/handouts/AIHA/AIHA\\_book.pdf](https://psandman.com/handouts/AIHA/AIHA_book.pdf)

### Send clear and consistent messages.

Avoid disseminating an excessive and confusing amount of information. Messages must be factual and clear. Deliver scientific communication in an easy-to-understand manner so it is accessible even to people with little or no education. Visual aids, such as graphics, diagrams or videos help.

Adapt key messages for different cultures and language groups, keeping the key themes consistent. Consider using personal stories to balance impersonal statistics. To manage panic and fear, balance messages that raise concern with reports of positive news (e.g. how well communities have worked together to address the crisis, the number of people recovered).

Messages must be simple, no more than three main ideas at a time. Avoid using new complex terms—use commonly known words instead.

Messages that give people meaningful things to do calm anxiety and promote a sense of control. Explain what you want the community to do and make sure it is specific and achievable. For example, “wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds every time you come back home.”

Less clear	More clear
Practice physical distancing	Stay home
Stay 2 meters—or three big steps apart	Keep others at arm’s length/3 big steps
Flatten the curve	Staying home, we do a lot to ease the burden on hospitals, and help saving lives
Practice personal hygiene	Wash your hands for 20 sec. Cough into your elbow.

### Engage the community.

Identify people that communities trust and build relationships with them. Involve them in decision-making to ensure that interventions are collaborative and contextually appropriate.

Engage with and sensitize trusted community members, including religious leaders, community leaders, traditional and alternative healers, and teachers, early in the response. Community leaders and other influencers, including musicians or athletes, can also be encouraged to model protective behaviors. It is important to identify and engage with community and professional networks such as religious groups, women’s groups, youth groups, parents’ groups, medical and private sector groups, among others.

To get real-time feedback about the response operations and public discourse, identify key informants in the community, such as health care workers, and assess posts on social media. This can help to identify issues and misinformation early, and adapt the response to local needs.

## Understand media.

In a crisis, people rely more on news media, especially digital news media, for regular updates. Governments can use media (including social media) to quickly and regularly reach large audiences. Media that have a high reach and a rapid news cycle should be prioritized, so updates can be communicated quickly (e.g. television, radio and social media).

Provide daily press briefings that include background information, statistics, graphics, etc., in addition to the key messages you want to communicate to the population. Newsrooms will be under considerable pressure to churn out content. It will be important to support media to produce accurate content that empowers the public rather than stoke alarm and panic. Media will need guidance on ways to report the facts while avoiding sensationalism. In addition to news coverage, encourage and support media to do awareness raising content such as “live reads” or presenter mentions, public service announcements (PSAs) and infographics, and to make advertising slots available at no or low cost for PSAs.

**Another note about media:** Though media may be a supportive partner in the early phases of a crisis, this is likely to change as conditions evolve. In the initial phase of a crisis, the media seems like a partner to government. Prepare for a shift in the storytelling as the media increasingly shines its light on what more government should be doing and finds fault with the response.<sup>6</sup>

## Deal with rumors and misinformation.

*“We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic,”  
said Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO.*

Misleading information can circulate faster than disease, especially on social media, and governments need a robust strategy to detect and respond to misinformation before it spreads widely. Misinformation can be avoided by having a consistent, up-to-date, authoritative and readily accessible source of factual, trusted information aligned between local and national levels of government.

Governments should establish and facilitate two-way communication by setting up hotlines and call-in radio programs where information is provided and the public can ask questions. Establish a dialogue with key informants in the community, such as leaders and health care workers, to get real-time feedback about the response operations and public discourse. If community demand for information and services is not matched with adequate supply, it will generate mistrust and other barriers to behavior change, which, once established, are difficult to overcome.

To minimize the disruption caused by community misbeliefs, provide essential information early, as soon it becomes available. Once misinformation spreads it can be difficult to counter. In regular updates on the pandemic, caution the public about the risks of sharing and being deceived by rumors and misinformation.

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6 Mullin S. New York City's Communication Trials by Fire, from West Nile to SARS. *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism: Biodefense Strategy, Practice, and Science*. 2003 Dec 1;1(4):267–72. <https://doi.org/10.1089/153871303771861478>

The level of government response to misinformation should match the seriousness of the rumors. Overblown, exaggerated responses may give more credence to rumors. One minor mistake or exaggeration in one newspaper, for example, does not warrant the same response as a 10-minute television news story full of misinformation. Responses to rumors should be clear and firm, and leave no room for doubt.

Social media monitoring is more critical than ever. Using social listening technology, millions of conversations can be analyzed to identify concerns and consider why conversations are trending in specific directions. Governments can then discover how to best respond.

### **Address stigma.**

Stigma is often caused by fear, uncertainty and misinformation. Stigma can undermine social cohesion, reduce adherence to public health and social measures, and lead to discrimination and even violence. It can prevent affected people from seeking proper treatment and protection.

Early and empathetic communication can help prevent the development of stigma around COVID-19. Use appropriate, non-stigmatizing language—don't attach locations, ethnicity or other markers to a disease. Regularly portray people of all faiths, races, ages, and social and economic status in materials such as in photographs, video and social media. This can help to minimize the risk of vulnerable populations, such as poor or elderly people and those living with HIV or other diseases, experiencing another layer of stigma.

In previous epidemics, health care workers have been rejected or stigmatized by their communities out of fear and misunderstanding. In the current COVID-19 crisis, implementing a “hero” campaign honoring health care workers may mitigate possible stigmatization, and also encourage and motivate health care workers. This should not, however, be a substitute for essential material support such as personal protective equipment or relief in the form of time off.

Share the stories of local people who have recovered or who have supported a loved one through recovery to emphasize that most people do recover from COVID-19, and to reduce stigma for people who are COVID-19 survivors or have tested positive.

## **Adaptive Response in Risk Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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Communicating and engaging with communities during a pandemic raises a number of challenges. One of the main challenges is that the pandemic will affect different communities at different times, and they will need different information. While one area may be heavily affected, other areas may not yet have experienced any cases. While some may be sheltering in place because of extensive community transmission, others may be reemerging after controlling the outbreak in their area.

The challenge for communicators is to get the right message to the right people at the right time. The actions that people need to take and their willingness and ability to do so will change over the course of the pandemic. So must the messages.

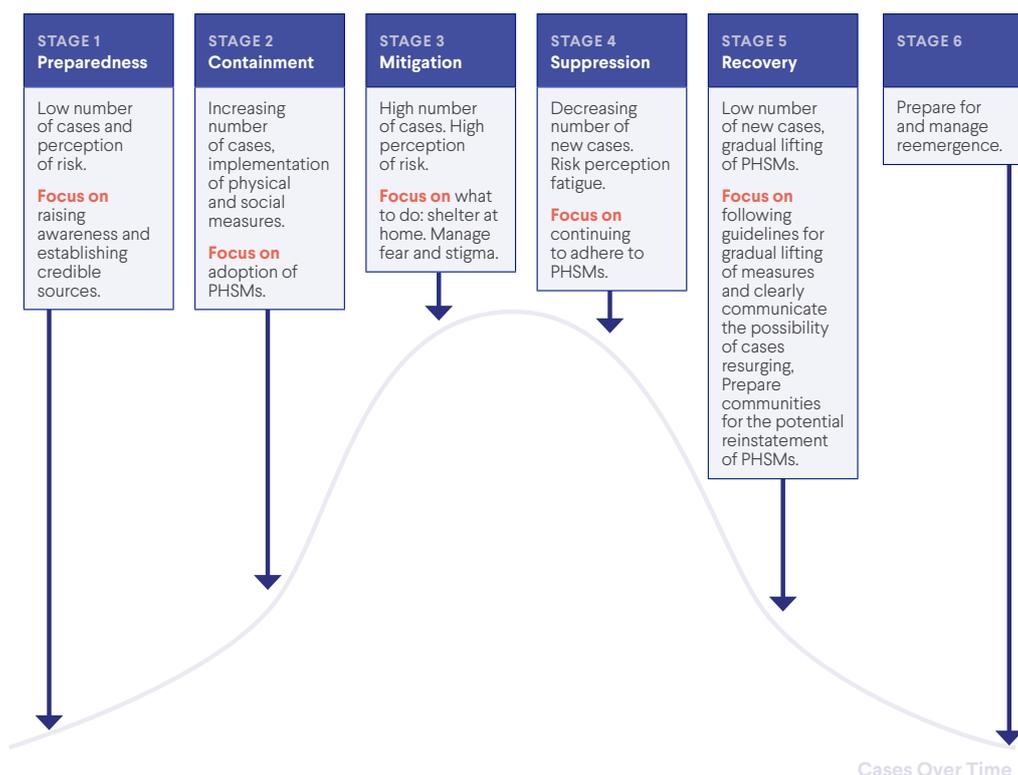
### Communication tailored to the local situation

As the conditions of the pandemic change over time —often quickly—it will be important to continually adapt messages and strategies to keep them aligned with the communities’ understanding of the health crisis. It is also critical to be attuned to their information needs, and to what is most likely to prevent infections and save lives.

Some public health and social measures that can reduce deaths in a pandemic also carry negative consequences. For example, canceling events and closing schools and businesses to limit the spread of the virus can result in large economic losses. Canceling religious services and closing places of worship is disruptive. Governments need to be ready to customize and adapt responses, to make difficult choices, to communicate using language that works best in their setting, and to balance public health benefits with social and economic costs.

### Staged approach to risk communication during COVID-19 pandemic

As the pandemic evolves through various stages, the messaging must evolve as well. A staged approach helps to provide individuals, families and communities with clear, practical messages that describe ways they can minimize their risk of the disease and support their family and community members safely and humanely. In this staged approach, messages are phased in, or “layered,” over the course of the pandemic, depending on the local outbreak’s severity and in line with the type of policies being implemented.



## Messages for Each Stage of an Epidemic

<b>STAGE</b> <b>1</b>	<b>Preparedness</b> No Cases or Low Number of Cases
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### OBJECTIVES:

- Begin to raise awareness about COVID-19
- Communicate the first case in your country: what is known and what is unknown.
- Educate the public about the steps people can take to protect themselves, their family and community, and, in doing so, slow the spread of the virus.
- Educate the public about populations at increased risk.
- Inform the public about country preparedness measures and acknowledge challenges.
- Establish a source of reliable and timely information.
- Express empathy for the uncertainty of the situation to build public trust.
- Create social cohesion

### MESSAGES:

- COVID-19 is a serious disease with severe health consequences that has spread rapidly around the world.
- We (government) are helping our health care systems prepare/cope with an anticipated large number of sick people.
- There are simple things you can do to help stop the spread of the virus and keep yourself and your community safer:
  - **Protect yourself.** Wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds many times a day and avoid gatherings of other people. Avoid touching your face.
  - **Protect your community.** Cough/sneeze into your elbow. Stay at home if you are sick.
- Instead of greeting with a handshake or kisses, greet with a wave or a warm smile.
- Visit [government web], join [WHO and local WhatsApp group] for the latest tips and information.
- We understand this is worrisome and hard on everyone. We are in this together—and we will get through this, together.

## STAGE

## 2

## Containment

Increasing Number of Cases

### OBJECTIVES:

- Introduce social/physical distancing:
  - Emphasize the importance of physical separation—explaining what it is and why it's important—and motivate people to stay at home when possible.
  - Build acceptance of measures including closures of entertainment facilities, places of worship, workplaces etc.
- Educate the public about symptoms; advise what to do if someone gets sick.
- Inform public of screening procedures that will be in place at health facilities.
- Address stigma and discrimination:
  - Ensure high risk groups are well informed and taking additional measures.
  - Express concerns and empathy for isolated and quarantined people.
  - Build solidarity rather than personal risk.

### MESSAGES:

- The virus will likely spread rapidly. If we act together now, we can save lives that will otherwise be lost—not just your life but the lives of your grandparents, neighbors and colleagues.
- COVID-19 is a new disease that has spread rapidly around the world. It is already in our country, putting everyone at risk of illness or even death. There are things we know, and things we don't know. Facts: [...] cases, [...] deaths, [...] tests performed. We don't know yet which treatments work best, whether a vaccine will be available soon or whether the virus is mutating. We understand this is concerning and impacting your everyday life, which is why we are committed to sharing with you what we know, when we know it.
- COVID-19 is a respiratory disease spreading when an infected person coughs or sneezes. You can also become infected by coming into contact with someone who is sick or touching surfaces contaminated with the virus and then touching your face.
- Protect yourself and others by washing your hands, coughing/sneezing in your elbow, and cleaning frequently touched objects and surfaces. Avoid touching your face.
- Some people with coronavirus don't feel sick at all, but can still spread it to others.
- Anyone can become infected regardless of faith, race, age groups or economic status. But older people, and those with underlying medical problems like heart disease, lung disease and diabetes, are more likely to develop serious illness. They should stay home and have a three-month supply of essential medicine.

- Symptoms can be mild or severe; the main symptoms include: fever, cough, shortness of breath.
- If you have mild symptoms, stay home. Isolate yourself in separate room or area if possible to protect others. Sick people and their caregivers should wear masks when in the same room. Close the door. Open the window. Clean common areas regularly. If you have severe symptoms (trouble breathing, shortness of breath, persistent pain or pressure in the chest, new confusion), contact your local health facility [explain how—WhatsApp or other communication methods] to ask which facility you should go to for COVID-19 care.
- Even if you are well, stay home as much as possible—it can save lives. When you must leave your home: go out during off-peak hours to avoid crowds on public transportation and in shops. [Announce government rules, e.g. alternate market days] Stay a minimum of 2 meters—or three big steps—away from others. Avoid eating or drinking outside. Keep hand sanitizer with you. After returning home, wash your hands well with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

Where large families share limited household space and self-isolation is difficult, try to find a way to quarantine older people and others at high risk to protect them.

## STAGE

## 3

## Mitigation During the Crisis

High Number of Cases

## OBJECTIVES:

- Tell people what the government’s plan is and encourage support and compliance:
  - Educate about the government’s response.
  - Explain steps taken to cushion the adverse effects and ensure that basic needs are met.

Acknowledge that some of the recommendations—such as closing of religious sites—may interfere with local beliefs and practices and cause disruption to the lives of local communities. Think in advance and offer alternatives, such as online or translated services and deliver this information to the community through the religious leaders.

- Indicate ways for communities to communicate back to government.
- Give timelines for decision-making, when possible.

- Give people reasons to stay home, and clarify when and how they can go out for essential tasks (food market, pharmacy etc.).
- Manage fear and stigma. (Do not say “don’t panic”)
- Reinforce the need for social cohesion and unity in dealing with the pandemic and remind the public that the measures government is instituting are to protect the public, not to make their lives unpleasant.
- Acknowledge the community’s efforts to prevent the spread of the virus, including health and essential workers. Encourage them to keep going.
- Balance the bad news with stories about successful recovery. Messages that focus exclusively on death and bad news may disempower communities, while news of improvement will contribute to optimism.

### MESSAGES:

- The virus has spread rapidly. This is a virus that can spread easily; it is nobody’s fault. Everyone is at risk and we are all in this together. We must act now to save lives.
- The government has already taken steps to protect the public and reduce the burden on health care services. [Describe public health and social measures in detail, who do they apply to, when decisions will be made about changing them].
- We understand these measures are hard, but we are counteracting some of the negative impacts by [describe relief measures].
- It’s tough, but those of us who can, must stay home. We understand this sometimes means choosing not to work or earn money for your family. We’re doing everything we can to support people affected by job loss due to COVID-19.
- Closing schools and businesses and sheltering in place/staying home helps health care facilities manage so they are not overwhelmed with critical cases, critical cases that could be your family, friend or neighbor.
- We need to protect health care workers, keep hospitals functioning, and support public health efforts such as contact tracing and testing.
- Staying home is critical:
  - People who don’t have any symptoms can still spread the virus without knowing it.
  - Everyone—including infants and young adults—is at risk for coronavirus. The best way to protect yourself and your family is to stay home.
  - Staying home helps lower the risk for everyone, including:
    - Health care workers, first responders and essential workers;
    - Your family and community members; and
    - Those most at risk.
- When you must leave your home: go out during off-peak hours to avoid crowds on public transportation and in shops. Stay a minimum of 2 meters—or three big steps—away from

others. Avoid eating or drinking outside. Keep hand sanitizer with you. After returning home, wash your hands well with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

- It's possible those who have been infected will become immune, but we don't know that, so we can't think of them as "supermen and superwomen" to be sent out to the front lines.
- We understand this is difficult. COVID-19 is unprecedented, there hasn't been a global health threat of this scale in one hundred years. It's important we continue to work together to reduce cases by staying home.

## STAGE

## 4

## Suppression

Decreasing Number of Cases

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Focus on continuing to adhere to public health and social measures.
- Watch for risk perception fatigue: as cases decrease, people may feel that they are less at risk and stop following public health and social measures.
- Encourage the population to keep going.
- Explain that measures will be in place until an effective treatment is found and tested, and perhaps until a vaccine is available.
- Emphasize relief measures taken to ease the negative impacts of the PHSMs

**MESSAGES:**

- Keep going. The measures are working and this is saving people's lives. This is still the time to support and protect each other.
- Vulnerable populations should be more cautious in relaxing adherence to measures, and may need additional social support until vaccines or treatments are developed.
- We understand you are anxious to get out of your homes and get back to work. Decisions to loosen public health and social measures are tough, and we're doing our best to prepare for reopening our community in a way that restarts the economy without seeing a new surge in cases.

## STAGE

## 5

## Recovery

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Explain to the public that the crisis point has passed, and we will be able to reopen gradually.
- Explain phased concept of “opening” of the economy (sometimes called “tap or circuit breaker”)
- Explain government decisions to prioritize opening critical entities based on societal benefit, such as child care, while protecting children and teachers.
- Recommend important actions to get life and commerce back to normal.
- Explain that measures may have to be re-imposed if case numbers begin to rise.
- Continue to address stigma and discrimination, including toward health care workers and people who have recovered

**MESSAGES:**

- The disease is no longer spreading widely, and it is safe to gradually return to normal activities such as work or school.
- As reopening begins, people who are medically vulnerable should continue to shelter in place.
- Re-opening prematurely or too quickly risks a resurgence of cases.
- Our health care system got stronger (check with reality, make sure it is not overpromising)
- The public health system has the capacity to test, trace and quarantine contacts, and isolate cases (check with reality)
- Be prepared for restrictions to be reinstated if the number of cases begins to rise.

## STAGE

## 6

## Prepare for and Manage Re-Emergence

**OBJECTIVES:**

- Explain to the public that the pandemic can re-emerge.
- Emphasize the need to stay aware of how the virus affects the community.

- Explain the status of vaccine development and how a vaccine may be rolled out if it becomes available.
- Support the reimplementation of PHSMs as appropriate (see stages 2 and 3).

**MESSAGES:**

- The virus has begun to spread rapidly again. We need to act now to save lives.
- We will reinstate some restrictions until spread of the virus is controlled again.

*Use messages from phase 2, 3 and 4 as appropriate.*

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