

13 principles for effective COVID-19 related communication

Communication principle	How to communicate according to the principle?	Practical example
Autonomy-supportive communication techniques		
Provide a meaningful rationale	Always explain the reasons and justifications for various rules and guidelines.	Clarify the evidence-based reasons behind any restrictions such as physical distancing rules: what is avoided, what is gained by following the rules. Always explain the mechanisms: why does a restriction have an effect.
Treat people as responsible agents	Treat people as active agents that can make responsible and informed decisions. Emphasize that their choices make a difference.	Tell that the prevention of virus depends on the choices and contributions we as individuals make, thus requiring each of us to take responsibility in doing our part. Appeal to their responsibility and show willingness to trust them.
Use non-controlling, informational language	Use informational, non-judgmental language that conveys freedom of choice and collaboration. Avoid pressuring and controlling language.	Avoid controlling and guilt-inducing phrases such as 'you must' that awaken defiance. Instead, show respect by appealing to people's values and sense of responsibility. Use autonomy-supportive phrases like 'we have a chance' and 'now we can'
Appeal to the aspirations, goals, and values of the people	Support desired behaviors by connecting them with what matters to people.	Highlight the value of protecting everyone, especially vulnerable people – everyone knows and cares about someone vulnerable.
Within necessary limits, provide choice on how to adhere to the rules	Even within constraints, allow people to make choices where possible and decide their own way of adherence.	Be, e.g., clear about what kinds of outdoor activities can be safely done and how people can freely choose from among these; encourage on-line connectedness and show different alternatives on how to follow the same restrictions.
Competence-supportive communication techniques		
Provide concrete instructions, clear expectations, and formulate collective goals to strive for	Offer people clear guidance on what behavior is required, concrete instructions on how this behavior is achieved & specific goals to strive for	Provide exact instructions to different situations such as when and how to practice hand hygiene. Formulate collective goals with clear critical parameters that are constantly followed.
Provide constructive, clear, and relevant feedback on how successfully people have adhered to the measures	Provide relevant, tailored, and timely feedback about how well people are doing and how their efforts have been progressing.	Communicating statistics about the success of social distancing measures and how the measures have helped to flatten the curve as regards infections, or decreased the number of ICU patients.
Address key obstacles for change	Identify what the likely barriers that people may have to behavior change, and provide instructions on how to overcome them.	In promoting, e.g., the use of face masks, fund masks to those with financial difficulties. In terms of hand hygiene, appropriately timed and situated reminders help people remember when hands should be washed.
Relatedness-supportive communication techniques		
Acknowledge people's own perspectives, feelings, and potential conflicts	Demonstrate that you recognize the barriers and obstacles people may have to engaging in key behaviors to convey empathy to them.	Clearly acknowledge people's feelings and the economic hardships, loneliness, and sacrifices many people are accepting as side effects of adhering to the guidelines.
Emphasize and facilitate shared identity and common fate	Build a sense of shared identity and common fate among the people affected by the crisis.	Emphasize how we are all in this together. Remind people that the crisis touches each of us in various ways. Share inspirational stories of how people help each other.
Build trust through transparent and open communication	Communicate what is known – and also what is not known – in a timely and transparent way to the public.	Be transparent about risks and uncertainties in the current knowledge. Publish models, estimations, and assumptions upon which the government is building the strategy.
Identify trusted messengers to mediate the guidelines to various groups	Use people who can legitimate the message and bring it in a trustworthy way to various groups and communities.	Use health professionals to communicate health guidelines rather than politicians. For various subgroups, try to identify trusted people within that community to act as messengers.
Appeal to people's natural willingness to help each other	Willingness to help other people can be a powerful motivation. Appeal to it.	Emphasize how we can help others, especially vulnerable risk groups, even by simple steps like staying home.