

The CALM Approach to Communicating in Times of Uncertainty



To be a trusted public health communicator in times of uncertainty, you need to make good choices about what, when, and how to communicate. Whether you're speaking at an event or drafting a social media post, using the CALM approach can help you establish and maintain your role as a trusted, reliable source of public health information in your community—especially in times of uncertainty.

C Connect to create trust now, before uncertainty arises.

The time to build trust is not during a crisis. To be trusted about issues that are complex and evolving, work to build relationships by reaching out to community partners, learn where and how they get their health information, and regularly share information with them. The deeper and more meaningful your audience connections are, the better the chance your messages will be trusted during times of uncertainty.

A Acknowledge what you know and what you don't, and that it may change.

As public health issues occur and evolve, be clear that you are sharing information and guidance based on the facts at the moment. It's important to say that you don't have all the information you wish you had and that information is still being gathered. Importantly, let people know that as the facts change and new information becomes available, your guidance may also change and you will share updates as soon as you are able.

L Lead with individual choice, so people are invested in outcomes.

Telling someone they must do something can lead to resistance or pushback. People prefer to be presented with information and options so that they can decide what is best for them and their families. When possible, consider sharing recommended actions along with the individual and community-level consequences of choosing to take or not take the actions. Individual ownership of the choice may help the person feel more connected to the potential benefit for them and their community.

M Maintain consistency, composure, and commitment in your messaging, to reassure your audience.

When uncertainty rises, people are drawn to the people and things that can provide stability and reassurance in their lives. Providing information in a similar format, from the same person, and at the same time of day can help convey a sense of regularity that is often lacking in uncertain times. The tone of your messages should signal composure as well. Differences in tone can show frustration or annoyance, things your audience may already be facing on their own. And if you say that an update is coming or new information will be available, be sure to keep your commitments.

For more information, consider de Beaumont Foundation's blog, "[Communicating in Times of Uncertainty: This Messaging Can Help.](#)"

As you use the CALM approach, continue to assess the level of uncertainty around a situation.

- What is the pace at which facts are changing?
- What is the volume of unanswered questions?
- Is the uncertainty shifting into other areas of public health?
- Is the impact of the uncertainty likely to extend for a period of time?

How you answer these questions can help you determine how to maintain or adjust your CALM approach over time.

- Resources referenced in the creation of this tool:
- Polling and focus groups conducted September–November 2023 by Frank Luntz for the de Beaumont Foundation and the CDC Foundation
 - "[Healthy Communication](#)" and "[Healthy Communication, Part 2](#)" by Carrie Fox, Founder and CEO of Mission Partners, LLC