How Individuals in Crisis Process Information:

Implications for educators

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1

No conflicts to disclose

2

One superintendent noted: "There wasn't a day that went by in the year following the crisis that we didn't face a communication-related challenge. It was like a tsunami, something complicated every day. A constant stream of people asking, wanting something."

Source: Thompson et al. (2017). Analyzing Postcrisis Challenges and Strategies Associated With School Shootings: An Application of Discourse of Renewal Theory. *Communication Studies*, *68*(5), 540.

3

Crisis + heightened public emotions + limited access to facts + rumor, gossip, speculation, assumption, and inference = an unstable information environment

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002, p. 5).

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https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/cerccorner/index.asp

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5

People believe the first message.

- When we lack information, we "fill in the blanks" with our existing beliefs.
- Rumors begin, as a way of supplying the missing information.
- We compare later messages with what we heard first, which leads to questioning the new information.
- Be first. Release accurate information as soon as possible
- Repeat the key information.
- Use multiple credible sources, all conveying the same information (e.g., scripting the message about a homework policy).

Source: Kerr, M. M. and King, G. (2018). *School crisis prevention and intervention, 2nd Edition.* Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014a).

6

We hold on to current beliefs.

- We hesitate to change our minds.
- We may trust advice from a familiar though uninformed person, while rejecting advice from experts we don't know.

- Be credible.
- Get trusted persons to help you deliver the information.
- Acknowledge the current belief, before reminding people of new and credible information.

7

We look for more information and opinions.

- We seek confirmation before acting (change TV channels, check with friends, read multiple social media sites).
- We watch others to see what action they take.

- Hold virtual briefings or send updates on the same day each week.
- Use routines to make things predictable.
- Remind people what they've been doing well.

8

We simplify information.

- We misinterpret nuanced or confusing communications.
- We tend to forget long messages.

- Keep messages simple.
- Avoid confusing language.
- Use translations and oral interpreters.
- Check the readability of text using an on-line app or the readability checker in your word processing app.
- Use the accessibility checker in Word

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What we know: How does an anxious person process information?

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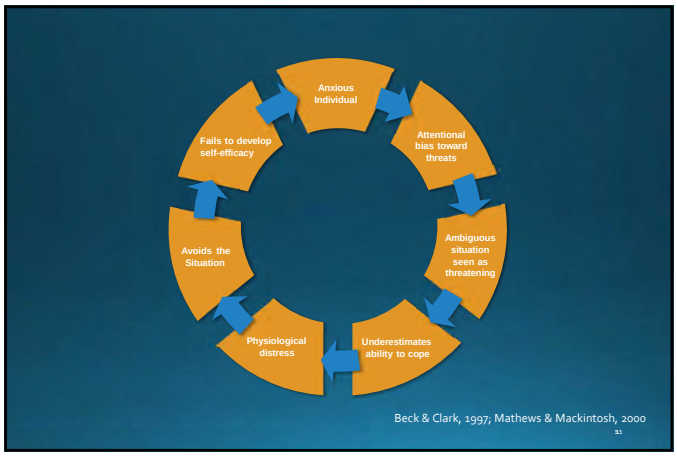

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Can you identify "threats" that parents or guardians might perceive?

I didn't make the right _____.
My child will _____.
Someone in my family will _____.
I will_____.
The school staff will _____.
The school expects me to _____.

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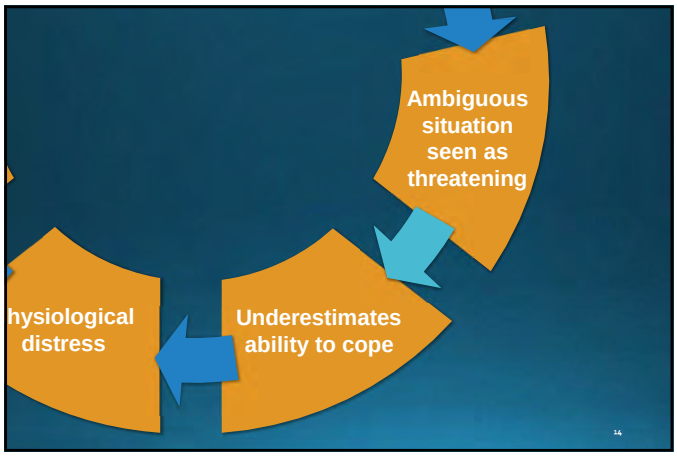

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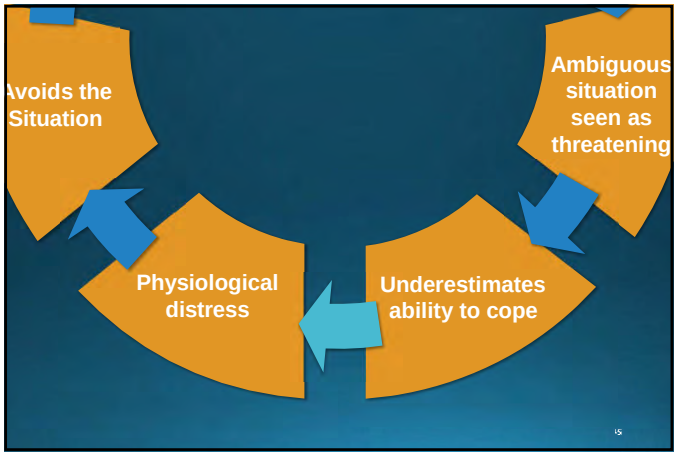

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What would tell you that someone underestimates their coping ability?

- "I just don't see_____."
- "How can you expect me to_____?"
- "Is everyone else able to _____?"
- "I am feeling _____."
- " Did anyone stop to think about_____?"

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Example: Parent Conversation

- " I heard that some parents were getting together to plan some virtual after-school activities to help parents that work. But my kids aren't motivated to do anything. And I can't get them to."
- "I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who had trouble with the dashboard. I'm terrible with computers."
- "I failed miserably at this in the spring. And that was AFTER my kids had been getting real instruction all year. Now, I will never be able to keep them on track."

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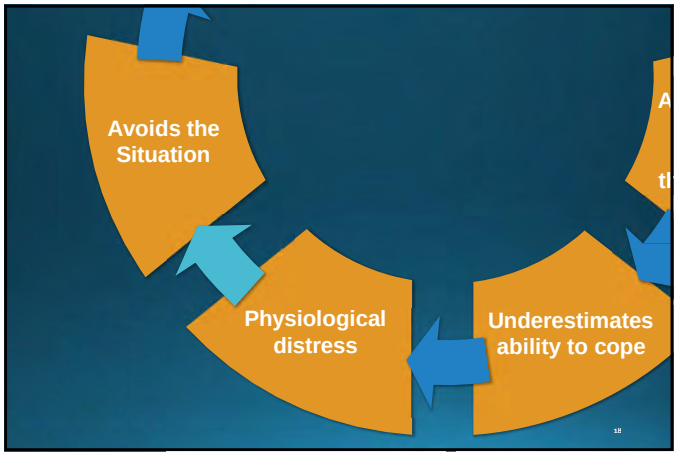

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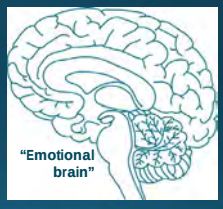
THE STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM

1. The brainstem detects that 'This is a problem!"
2. Amygdala senses threat and sets off the alarm.
3. Thinking brain goes off line. Emotional brain takes over and activates fight, flight or freeze response.
4. Goal: Thinking brain helps shut off the alarm and helps us to calm down.



Guarino, K. & Chagnon, E. (2018). Trauma-sensitive schools training package. Washington, DC: National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments.

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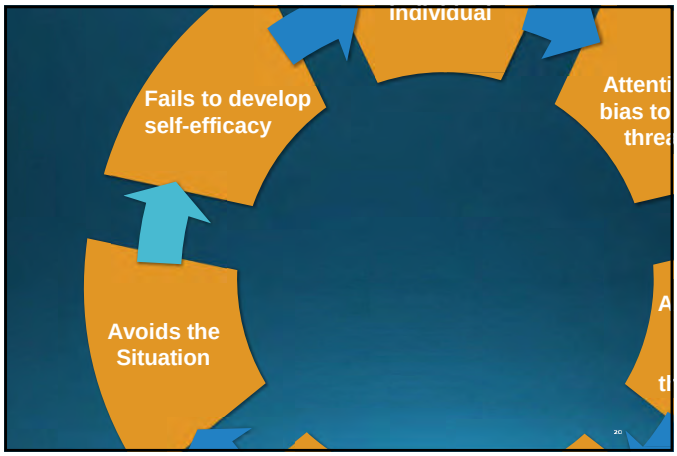

20

References

- Avery, E., & Park, S. (2016). Effects of crisis efficacy on intentions to follow directives during crisis. Journal of Public Relations Research, 28(2), 72-86.
- Beck, A. T., & Clark, D. A. (1997). An information processing model of anxiety: Automatic and strategic processes. *Behaviour research and therapy*, *35*(1), 49-58.
- Mathews, A., & Mackintosh, B. (2000). Induced emotional interpretation bias and anxiety. *Journal of abnormal psychology*, *109*(4), 602.
- US Department of Health and Human Services. Communicating in a crisis: risk communication guidelines for public officials. 2002. US Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, DC.

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How can you guess someone's avoiding the stressor?

- You send an email but they_____.
- You get a response that's_____.
- They make _____.
- Things get worse, not _____.
- They focus on something that's_____ instead.
- They sound like a broken _____.
- They focus not on what they can control but on what they _____ _____.
- They tell themselves_____.

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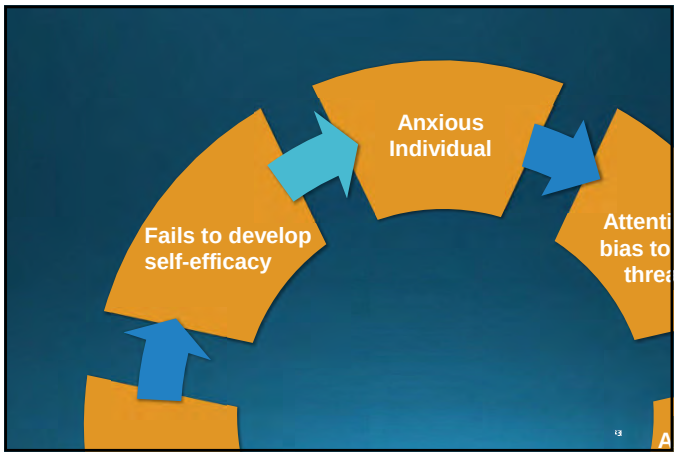

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What's self efficacy and why is it important during a crisis?

"Over the past three decades, Bandura's (1977) construct of self-efficacy, or the perceived ability to perform an action to achieve a specific outcome, has persisted as one of the strongest predictors of behavior." (Avery & Park, 2016, p. 73)

Question: Why is it important to us that parents have self-efficacy? What do we want them to feel competent *about?*

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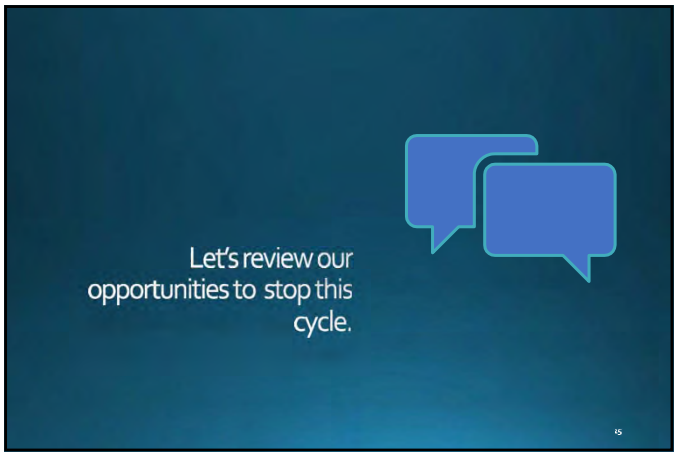
Let's review our opportunities to stop this cycle.
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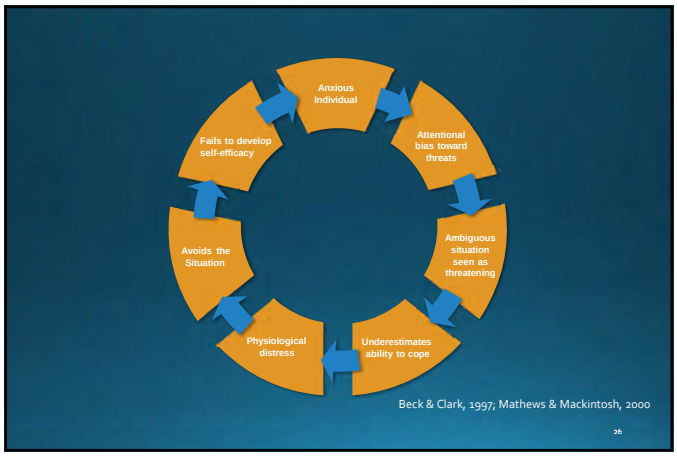
Anxious Individual
Attentional bias toward threats
Ambiguous situation seen as threatening
Underestimates ability to cope
Physiological distress
Avoids the Situation
Fails to develop self-efficacy
Beck & Clark, 1997; Mathews & Mackintosh, 2000
26

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Attentional bias toward threats
Ambiguous situation seen as threatening
Take time to listen to the real message. What's really bothering the parent?
Say it back to them. "So you are afraid that _____?"
Recall how you listen and reassure others in your world.
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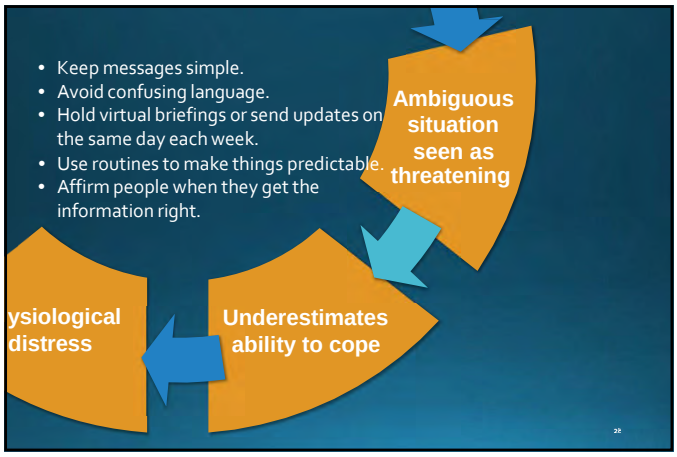
Keep messages simple.
Avoid confusing language.
Hold virtual briefings or send updates on the same day each week.
Use routines to make things predictable.
Affirm people when they get the information right.
Ambiguous situation seen as threatening
Underestimates ability to cope
ysiological distress

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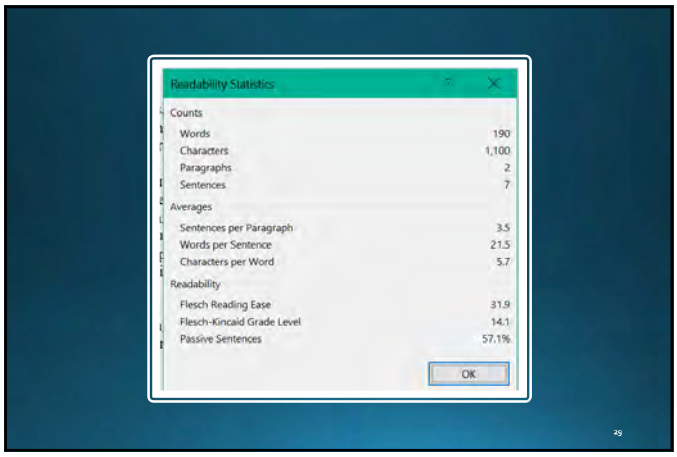
Readability Statistics
Counts
Words 190
Characters 1,100
Paragraphs 2
Sentences 7
Averages
Sentences per Paragraph 3.5
Words per Sentence 21.5
Characters per Word 5.7
Readability
Flesch Reading Ease 31.9
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level 14.1
Passive Sentences 57.1%
OK

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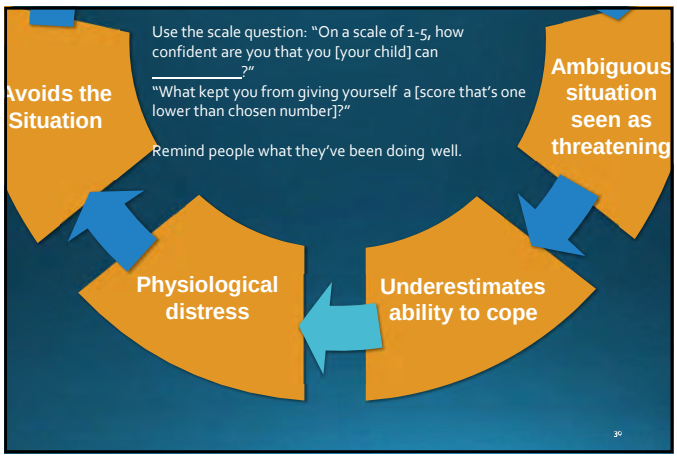
Use the scale question: "On a scale of 1-5, how confident are you that you [your child] can _____?"
"What kept you from giving yourself a [score that's one lower than chosen number]?"
Remind people what they've been doing well.
Ambiguous situation seen as threatening
Underestimates ability to cope
Physiological distress
Avoids the Situation

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How can we apply all this to improve our district's communications?

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The CERC Rhythm

Engage Community • Empower Decision-Making • Evaluate

Preparation	Initial	Maintenance	Resolution
▪ Draft and test messages ▪ Develop partnerships ▪ Create plans ▪ Determine approval process	▪ Express empathy ▪ Explain risks ▪ Promote action ▪ Describe response efforts	▪ Explain ongoing risks ▪ Segment audiences ▪ Provide background information ▪ Address rumors	▪ Motivate vigilance ▪ Discuss lessons learned ▪ Revise plan

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The Six Principles of CERC

Throughout these chapters, six principles of effective emergency and risk communications are emphasized:

1. **Be First:**
2. **Be Right:** Accuracy establishes credibility. Information can include what is known, what is not known, and what is being done to fill in the gaps.
3. **Be Credible:** Honesty and truthfulness should not be compromised during crises.
4. **Express Empathy:**
5. **Promote Action:**
6. **Show Respect:**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018 *Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication* (CERC).

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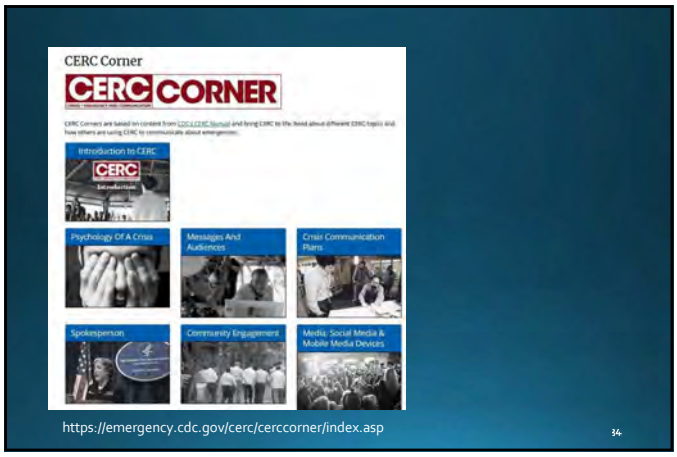
CERC Corner
CERC CORNER
Introduction to CERC
Psychology Of A Crisis
Messages And Audiences
Crisis Communication Plans
Spokesperson
Community Engagement
Media; Social Media & Mobile Media Devices
https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/cerccorner/index.asp
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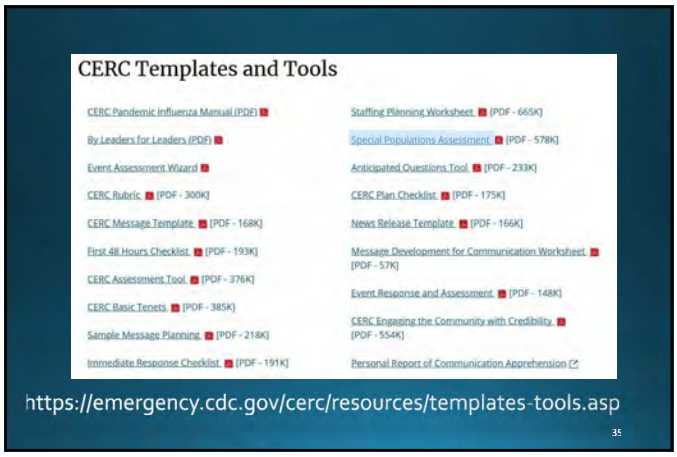
CERC Templates and Tools
CERC Pandemic Influenza Manual (PDF)
By Leaders for Leaders (PDF)
Event Assessment Wizard
CERC Rubric [PDF - 300K]
CERC Message Template [PDF - 168K]
First 48 Hours Checklist [PDF - 193K]
CERC Assessment Tool [PDF - 376K]
CERC Basic Tenets [PDF - 385K]
Sample Message Planning [PDF - 218K]
Immediate Response Checklist [PDF - 191K]
Staffing Planning Worksheet [PDF - 665K]
Special Populations Assessment [PDF - 578K]
Anticipated Questions Tool [PDF - 233K]
CERC Plan Checklist [PDF - 175K]
News Release Template [PDF - 166K]
Message Development for Communication Worksheet [PDF - 57K]
Event Response and Assessment [PDF - 148K]
CERC Engaging the Community with Credibility [PDF - 554K]
Personal Report of Communication Apprehension
https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/resources/templates-tools.asp
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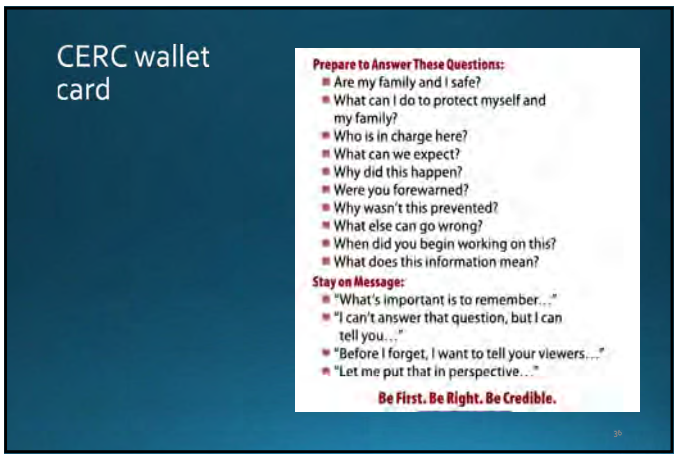
CERC wallet card
Prepare to Answer These Questions:
Are my family and I safe?
What can I do to protect myself and my family?
Who is in charge here?
What can we expect?
Why did this happen?
Were you forewarned?
Why wasn't this prevented?
What else can go wrong?
When did you begin working on this?
What does this information mean?
Stay on Message:
"What's important is to remember..."
"I can't answer that question, but I can tell you..."
"Before I forget, I want to tell your viewers..."
"Let me put that in perspective..."
Be First. Be Right. Be Credible.

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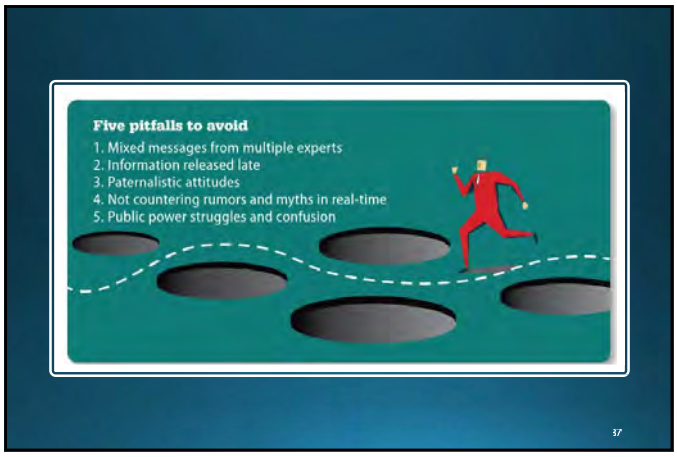

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The message for educators

"Ignoring communication until after a crisis has occurred allows others to frame the crisis for themselves. When that happens, organizations are disadvantaged in their crisis response."

Source: Payne, H. J., Jerome, A. M., Thompson, B., & Mazer, J. P. (2018). Relationship building and message planning: An exploration of media challenges and strategies used during school crises at the P 12 level. *Public Relations Review*, *p.* 2.

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- Avery, E., & Park, S. (2016). Effects of crisis efficacy on intentions to follow directives during crisis. Journal of Public Relations Research, 28(2), 72-86.
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