

Creating an Effective Disaster Planning Message

How using the right emotions can help persuade Americans to better prepare for emergencies.

Our world is a complex place. Our water comes through pipes we never see. Our electricity comes from power plants far away. Our financial transactions occur via an internet few of us understand. As with any complex system, disruptions in one place can create shockwaves around the world, with sudden disastrous results on a local, regional or even national scale. These disruptions often take the form of hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes or ice storms, but they can include fires, terrorists' attacks, pandemics and more and all have threatened America in recent years. Despite this myriad of dangers, a Federal Emergency Management Agency survey in 2012 found that fewer than fifty percent of Americans were prepared for a disaster.

There are many reasons why Americans are not focused on preparing for emergencies. Training for emergencies can be costly, supplies can take up too much space and being known as a "doomsday prepper" can be embarrassing. But more than those logistical and social concerns, the underlying cause of American's lack of preparedness is our inability to use emotions to shape a more effective preparedness message.

In particular, messaging around emergency planning often focusses on fear, an important emotion to use when trying to get people to do something. Carol Izard from the University of Delaware shows that fear has a pivotal role to play in how humans respond to any threatening situation. Upon waking up in a burning house, the human brain does not have enough time to

thoughtfully consider its options before telling the body to take flight. The “get out” message flashes directly through the sympathetic nervous system and a successful escape is made.

This mental shortcut drives the brain into a flight, fright or freeze scenario. But Bench and Lench from Texas A&M tell us we are not wired to maintain that posture, or any other mental state, for long. Over time, the stimulation of a burning building, or a barrage of fear-based messages depicting disasters of biblical proportions, starts to diminish. Eventually our brains will seek stimulation elsewhere because the constant message of “prepare for disaster” no longer engages us. It is time to move on to Angry Birds and cute kitten videos.

Fortunately, there are other motivating emotions besides fear. Guilt, as many parents know, is also an effective way to get people to do things. Turner and Underhill in *Communications Quarterly* argue that, up to a point, guilt can motivate people to do things that help keep other people safe, such as preparing for a disaster. But the exact level of guilt to use can be tricky. Too much guilt can backfire, making people angry at the messenger. And people who are naturally angry are likely to get even angrier at guilt inducing messages.

Of course, few people are ever just fearful, bored or guilty. Emotions, like disasters, come in all shapes and sizes and frequently mix together. Fernando and colleagues in *Emotion* contend that the mixture of emotions in all of us creates emotional profiles that make us susceptible to a certain type of messaging and that identifying and targeting people with similar emotional profiles would allow messengers to create more effective messages. Figuring out exactly what emotional profile would best get specific groups of people to take emergency preparedness seriously will require more study to get right, but the likelihood of a wide variety of relevant emotional profiles promises to create an equally wide variety of messages, alleviating the distracting effect of boredom on preparedness efforts.

All of these emotionally geared messages will do little good if they come from an untrusted messenger. Surveying Iowa farmers about their thoughts on responding to climate change, Arbuckle and colleagues in Environment and Behavior found that these citizens, arguably as American as one gets, do not respond favorably to preparedness messages from sources they don't trust. After all, it is going to be very expensive to build the infrastructure and implement the operational changes necessary for farmers to combat the effects of climate change, whether it be flood control, pest infestations or drought. People aren't likely to spend that sort of money based on advice from someone they consider a quack. Future emergency planning messages should come from messengers that the recipient trusts. If that trust does not currently exist, disaster planning messengers need to create it.

The world of the future is unlikely to be any less crises-ridden than the world of today. Knowing that past messaging about the importance of emergency preparedness has not adequately worked, future emergency planning messengers must demonstrate a better understanding of how emotions, in all their varieties and mixtures, can be used to help make America a more resilient country.