

Communication During Pandemics and Outbreaks

Module 2 | STRIPE HIV Pandemic Preparedness Certification

Learner Guide



Overview

Goal

The goal of this module is to teach learners how to communicate effectively with patients and the wider community during an outbreak or pandemic. This is Module 2 of the Pandemic Preparedness Certificate course; Module 1 is Introduction to Outbreak Disease Surveillance.

Objectives

By the end of the module, the learner will be able to:

1. Describe the key objectives of communication—and how to achieve them—when front-line healthcare workers share information with the community during a disease outbreak
2. Demonstrate how to provide effective verbal communication with patients regarding a disease outbreak or pandemic
3. Demonstrate how to provide concise and effective written communication with patients regarding a disease outbreak or pandemic

Workshop Roadmap

Workshop Timeline: 100 minutes

Duration	Content	Activities
5 minutes	Introduction	Icebreaker activity (5 minutes)
25 minutes	Objective #1 : Describe the key objectives of communication—and how to achieve them—when front-line healthcare workers are sharing information with the public during a disease outbreak	• Activity #1: Small Group Discussion (10 minutes) • Activity #2: Communication Objectives and Strategies Table (15 minutes)
25 minutes	Objective #2 : Demonstrate how to provide effective verbal communication with patients regarding a disease outbreak or pandemic	Activity #3 : Practicing Communication in Outbreak Role Play (25 minutes)
40 minutes	Objective #3 : Demonstrate how to provide concise and effective written communication with patients regarding a disease outbreak or pandemic	Activity #4 : Develop a Community Message on Mpox (40 minutes)
5 minutes	Conclusion	Review Objectives (5 minutes)

Additional learner materials (ALM)

[Africa CDC Technical Factsheet on Mpox](#) (Used in Activity 4)

Acronyms/Abbreviations

ALM Additional Learner Material

Learning Content with Objectives

Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to Module 2 – Communication During Pandemics and Outbreaks. The goal of this module is to teach learners how to communicate effectively with patients and the wider community during a pandemic or outbreak. Communication between multiple parties is important: healthcare workers need to have open communication with public health officials, while also communicating well with the communities they serve and individual patients. Outbreaks of new or unfamiliar diseases can be associated with fear and uncertainty, which create conditions that are ripe for the spread of misinformation. Healthcare workers can be seen as trusted sources of information, particularly if they communicate clearly and accurately, while also acknowledging limitations in knowledge when they exist.

Activity: Icebreaker (5 minutes)

The facilitator may choose to conduct an icebreaker to start the module.

Objective 1: Describe the key objectives of communication—and how to achieve them—when front-line healthcare workers share information with the public during a disease outbreak (25 minutes)

In the face of a new or unfamiliar outbreak of an infectious disease, communication from healthcare workers about the threat is vital. **In general, the early stages of communication to the public will try to achieve three main objectives:**

1. Maintain or instil trust and confidence so that the public will view healthcare workers as important sources of information as more is learned
2. Inform the public about the situation
3. Promote action and/or behavioural change to limit the threat from the outbreak

Achieving these objectives requires healthcare workers to know their audience.

Activity #1: Small Group Discussion (10 minutes)

Discuss the following questions in your small group. Be prepared to share your thoughts with the larger group.

- Why is it important to know your audience?
- What is important to know about your audience when communicating during a disease outbreak?
- Are you aware of any instances when communication with patients or the general public went poorly because healthcare workers did not understand their audience?

Activity #2: Communication Objectives and Strategies (15 minutes)

Step 1: Discuss the three communication objectives and strategies to achieve them (5 minutes)

In your small groups, discuss how a frontline healthcare worker should communicate during an outbreak to meet each of the three communication objectives. As a reminder, the main communication objectives are:

1. Maintain or instil trust and confidence so that the public will view healthcare workers as important sources of information, as more is learned
2. Inform the public about the situation
3. Promote action and/or behavioural change to limit the threat from the outbreak

Before breaking into small groups, however, review the table below which describes strategies to meet each of the three communication objectives.

Communication Objectives and Strategies

Communication Objectives	Communication Strategies
Maintain or instil trust and confidence	Ensure that communication demonstrates: • <u>Empathy and caring—always start by expressing empathy and acknowledging the concerns/anxiety/worry for those affected by the outbreak; avoid using stigmatizing language and ensure patient confidentiality</u> • <u>Active listening (be attentive and responsive to the emotional and psychological needs of the audience)</u> • Honesty and openness • Dedication, commitment, competence and expertise. Express a desire to find answers.
Inform the public	• <u>Clarity:</u> Ensure that the audience understands the nature of the threat how it spreads, and what actions they should take. Avoid medical jargon and use simple, understandable terms, preferably in the local language or dialect. • <u>Accuracy:</u> Information should be accurate and avoid unnecessary corrections to the information that may create confusion, fear or mistrust in the community. Do not over-reassure and make sure to acknowledge uncertainty when it exists. Explain the process for finding answers. • <u>Timeliness:</u> Timely information allows early mitigation in the spread, fosters trust, & prevents misinformation. Foreshadow what may come next, if known.
Promote action / behavioural change	• Provide clear, accurate, timely information regarding what people can do to protect themselves and others (but acknowledge that making behavioural changes can be challenging) • <u>Link your recommendations for behavioural change to the values and motivations stated by your patients (e.g. caring for others, protecting the health of others in their household, avoiding missing time at work due to illness, etc)</u>

Step 2: Practice using the communication strategies (10 minutes)

- Now, work in small groups to write out a few sample sentences that healthcare workers could say when talking to the public that rely on one of the strategies written above.
- Try to come up with at least 2-3 sentences for each of the three objectives. Write them in the Using the “Sample Sentences to Meet Communication Objectives” table.
- For example, to demonstrate empathy and caring (to meet the first communication objective – maintain and instil trust and confidence), learners may write: “We know this situation is scary, but it is important to know what we all can do to protect ourselves from this new infection.”
- Spend 10 minutes on this activity and be ready to share your answers with the large group.

Sample Sentences to Meet Communication Objectives

Communication Objectives	Sample Sentences
Maintain or instil trust and confidence	“We know this situation is scary, but it is important to know what we all can do to protect ourselves from this new infection.”
Inform the public	
Promote action / behavioural change	

Objective 2: Demonstrate how to provide effective verbal communication with patients regarding a disease outbreak or pandemic (25 minutes)

Activity #3: Practicing Communication in Outbreak Role Play (25 minutes)

Now that we have reviewed the three main objectives of communication with the community during an infectious disease outbreak (and the strategies to achieve these objectives), we will practice modelling effective communication in pairs.

In pairs, we will take turns practising effective communication in two different scenarios. In each scenario, one person will play a healthcare worker, and the other will play a community member (patient or neighbour). After the first role play, partners will switch roles and complete the second scenario.

- Review your role play card to understand your role.
- When playing the role of the healthcare worker, feel free to take notes on key points to communicate.

After role-playing both scenarios, we will discuss how it went as a large group:

- What went well and what was challenging? Focus your discussion on the three main objectives in Activity #2: maintaining or instilling trust and confidence, informing the public, and promoting action/behavioural change.
- When you were playing the role of the **patient or neighbour**, what things did the healthcare worker say or do that helped you the most?
- When you were playing the role of the **healthcare worker**, how did you try to motivate your partner (the patient or neighbour) into action or behavioural change?
- Finally, discuss the role of traditional medicine in your context and how healthcare workers can respectfully address misinformation while building trust.

Objective 3: Demonstrate how to provide concise and effective written communication with patients regarding a disease outbreak or pandemic (40 minutes)

Activity #4: Develop a Community Message on Mpox (40 minutes)

An outbreak of mpox (formerly called monkeypox) has recently been reported in your community. Healthcare providers at your facility are tasked with putting together a message that will be posted on social media pages, in WhatsApp groups, and inside your health facility waiting rooms to inform the public about mpox, the current outbreak, and actions they should take to protect themselves and their community.

Step 1: Outline your message (5 minutes)

Start by creating an outline for your message. What are the key topics you would like to communicate about mpox?

Health organizations like the Africa CDC commonly create (and update) [Resources](#) for common infectious diseases. These detailed resources (e.g., fact sheets) aim to educate both healthcare workers and the community at large about the threat.

Step 2: Write a Brief Community Communication (35 minutes)

Now, using your outline from Step 1 (or adapt it using the sample outline provided), write a brief communication about mpox for the community.

- Use the Africa CDC Mpox Technical in the Additional Learner Materials to write a brief communication on mpox for the community.
- Keep your communication short—ideally, no more than a full page of bulleted points.
- Focus on clear, simple language that the public can easily understand.
- Avoid using language that may stigmatize others
- Focus your efforts on the three main objectives of communication in this module: maintaining or instilling trust and confidence, informing the public, and promoting action/behavioural change

Conclusion (5 minutes)

Activity: Review Objectives (5 minutes)

Read through each objective and summarize key learning points.

Resources

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Emergency preparedness and response: manual and tools. <http://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/resources/index.asp>
2. Communicating During an Outbreak or Public Health Investigation. <https://www.cdc.gov/eis/field-epi-manual/chapters/Communicating-Investigation.html>
3. Communication strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic: Unforeseen opportunities and drawbacks. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8501229/>
4. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. A primer on health risk communication principles and practices. <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/7692> (CDC Stacks is the CDC's web-based archive)
5. Reynolds B, Quinn Crouse S. Effective communication during an influenza pandemic: the value of using a crisis and emergency risk communication framework. Health Promot Pract. 2008;9(4 Suppl):13S–17S.