

Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action

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Bullet points of a November 20, 2001 presentation to the
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; not intended for stand-alone use.

1. Don't over-reassure.
 2. Put the "good news" in subordinate clauses.
 3. Acknowledge uncertainty.
 4. Share dilemmas.
 5. Do anticipatory guidance.
 6. Acknowledge the sins of the past.
 7. Be regretful, not defensive.
 8. Ride the preparedness seesaw.
 9. Acknowledge and legitimate people's fears.
 10. Surface the underlying fear of future bioterrorism.
 11. Be gentle about that awful future.
 12. Surface and legitimate the misery.
 13. Express wishes.
 14. Stop trying to allay panic.
 15. Protect your credibility – and reduce the chances of panic – with candor.
 16. Err on the alarming side.
 17. Be willing to answer what-if questions.
 18. Give people things to do.
 19. Give people a choice of actions to match their level of concern.
 20. Harness the hypervigilance ... to disentangle it from the paranoia.
 21. Ask more of people.
 22. Never use the word "safe" without qualifying it.
 23. Find a non-zero standard for anthrax.
 24. Be careful with risk comparisons.
 25. Identify and legitimate misimpressions before correcting them.
 26. Watch out for your own outrage.
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For more about my take on this issue, see:

- Anthrax, Bioterrorism, and Risk Communication: Guidelines for Action (Dec 2001) – www.psandman.com/col/part1.htm
- CDC Responds: Risk Communication and Bioterrorism (Dec 2001) – www.sph.unc.edu/about/webcasts/2001-12-06_risk/view_webcast_archive.cfm
- Anthrax, politicians, and PR (Feb 2002) – www.psandman.com/gst2002.htm#rowan

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