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TALKING TO THE PUBLIC ABOUT RISK

A 10-Minute Guide

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What is Risk Communication?

- Risk communication refers to the exchange of information, advice, and opinions between experts/officials and people facing threats to their health, economic or social well-being.
- The primary objective of risk communication activities is to enable people at risk from a hazard to make informed decisions to protect themselves and those in their care, while accurately guiding their perceptions of these risks.
- For public health emergencies and crises such as COVID-19, risk communication includes a range of communication approaches designed to:
  - **Guide** preparedness, planning, response, and recovery
  - **Inform** immediate and longer-term decision making
  - **Reduce** or eliminate panic
  - **Encourage** positive actions and behaviours
  - **Prevent** ineffective or damaging responses
  - **Maintain** trust with authorities and leaders

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5 Key Principles for Effective Risk Communication

1. Build and maintain **trust and credibility** with your audience, above all else.
2. Be **clear and transparent**, with particular attention to initial messages.
3. Be **timely** with releasing information and **proactive** when information changes. Maximize use of **social media** channels.
4. Always **acknowledge** the situation, even if you are uncertain of all the facts.
5. Make sure to **coordinate** communications with all necessary parties. Deploy **consistent** messaging with a common voice.

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EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION MODEL

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Putting the Risk Communication Model to Use

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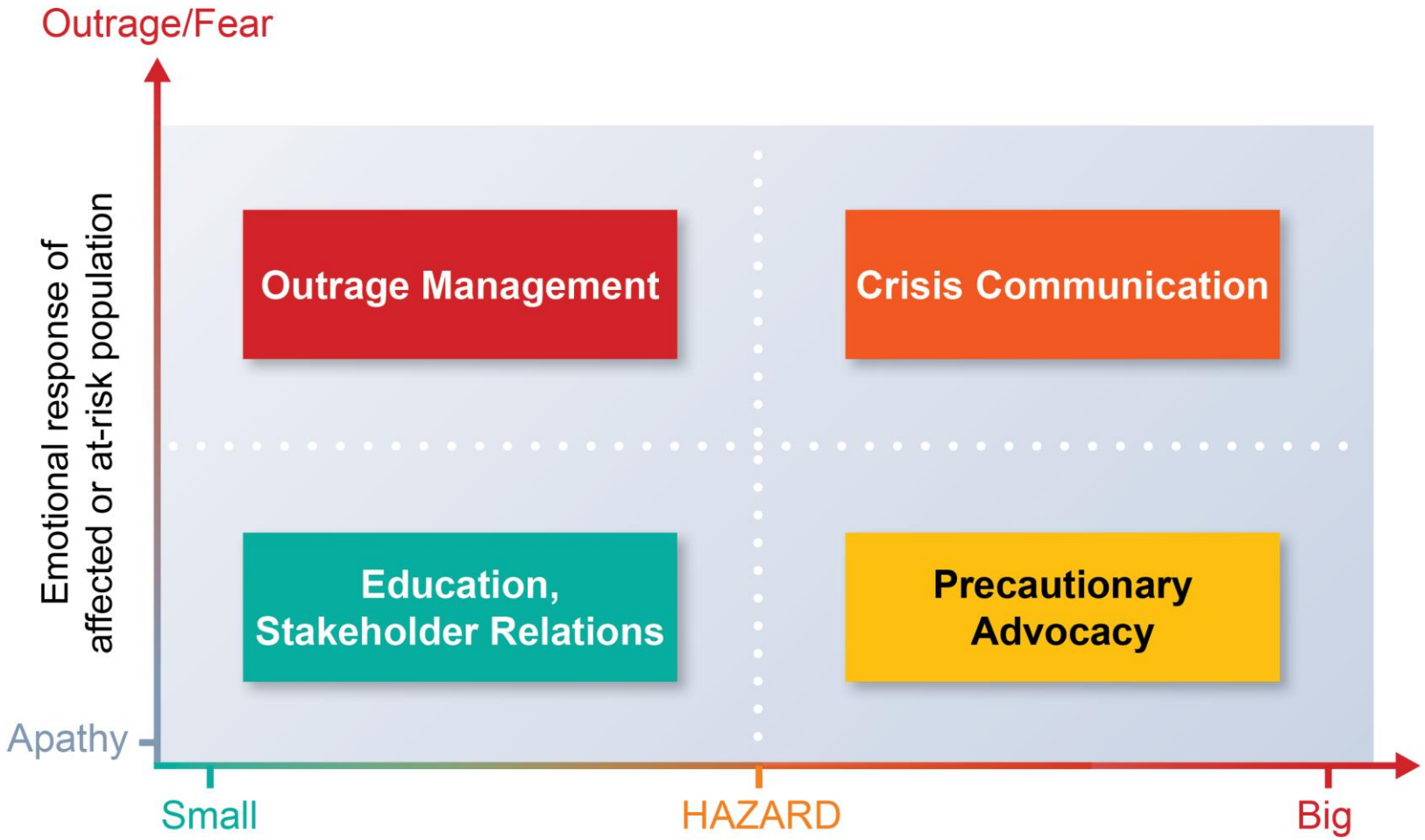
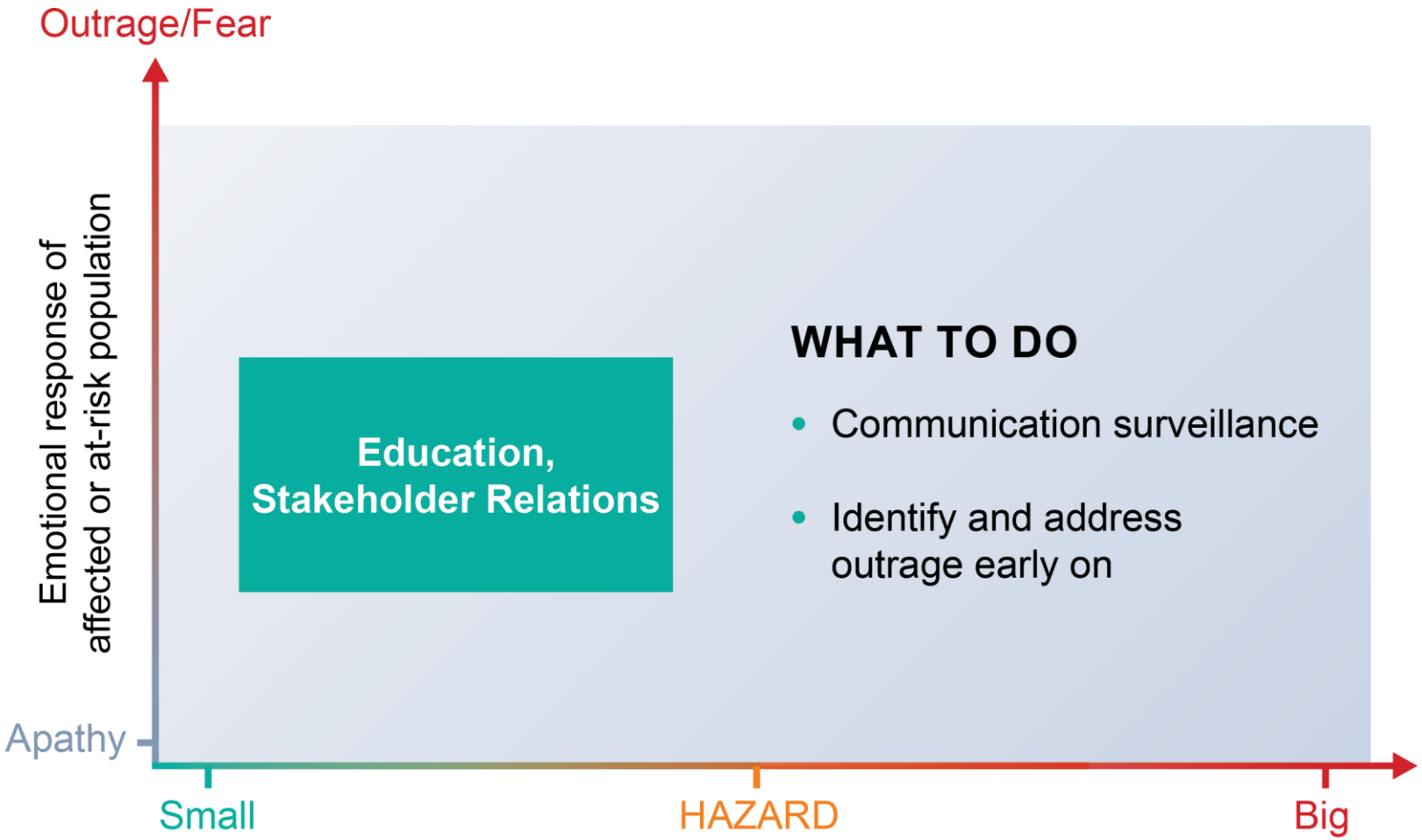
Risk Communication Strategies




Outrage/Fear
Emotional response of affected or at-risk population
Apathy
Small
HAZARD
Big
Education, Stakeholder Relations
WHAT TO DO
Communication surveillance
Identify and address outrage early on

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Outrage/Fear
Emotional response of affected or at-risk population
Apathy
Outrage Management
WHAT TO DO
• Listen and acknowledge the truth
• Give facts about why there is no danger
• "CALM DOWN!" (respectfully)
Small
HAZARD
Big

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7 Tips for Building Public Trust and Credibility

1. Accept and involve the public as a partner. Never give your audience any reason to think that their interests aren't first and foremost.
2. Appreciate the public's specific concerns. Monitor their feedback, demonstrate empathy, and adjust your approach accordingly.
3. Be prepared for human nature. Risk communication is focused heavily on managing emotional reactions and impulses in times of chaos and high stress.
4. Address rumours, speculation, and misinformation immediately and assertively.
5. Be honest and open about what you know and what you don't.
6. Meet the informational needs of the media. Enable them to get accurate messages to your audience quickly and effectively.
7. Work only with highly-credible and reputable news outlets.

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Communicating Complex, Scientific, and Technical Information

- Use consistent terminology throughout an emergency/crisis.
- Avoid acronyms and jargon when at all possible.
- Carefully consider when visual assets can more clearly communicate key information.
- Ensure your answers are relevant to your audience.
- Use familiar frames of reference and appropriate analogies to explain complex concepts.

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How to Deal With Uncertainty

- Recognizing and admitting uncertainty is the reality of most risk communication situations.
- Most people do not deal well with periods of uncertainty.
- Be frank about information that is evolving, not known, or unavailable.
- Saying “I don’t know” can actually build credibility. But back it up by explaining why.
- Audiences demanding 100% certainty are really questioning the underlying values and processes, not the science.

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Understanding How the Public Perceives Risk

- The public's perception of the term "risk" is also an important barrier to effective risk communication.
- Two fundamental parameters lead people to have an aggregated understanding of risk:
  - **A) Knowledge about probabilities**
  - **B) Knowledge about outcomes**
- In this situation, the potential for an incomplete understanding of risk and disproportionate emotional response is high.
- These informational variables need to be managed accordingly as outlined in the next two slides.

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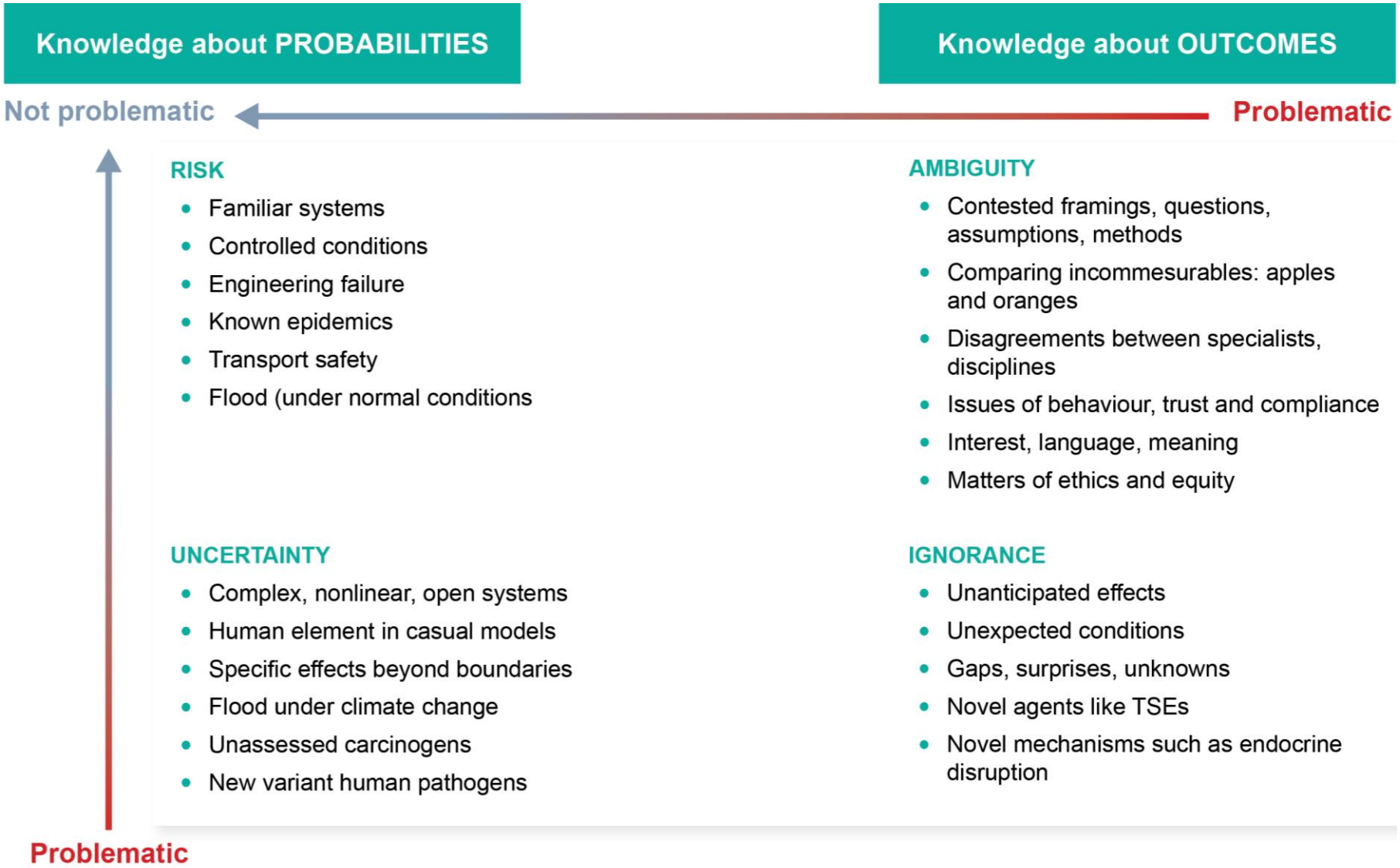

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People are less concerned about risks that are:

- Voluntary
- Familiar
- Controllable
- Controlled by self
- Fair
- Chronic
- Diffuse
- Not fatal

They are more concerned by risks that are:

- Involuntary
- Unfamiliar
- Uncontrollable
- Controlled by others
- Unfair
- Acute
- Focused in time and space
- Fatal

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COVID-19 Considerations

- Communicating the scientific consensus regarding associated issues can be used to counter misinformation.
- When science is rapidly in flux, trust in public institutions can erode if uncertainty isn't addressed properly.
- It is important to be explicit about any ambiguities in the evidence supporting public health decision making.
- Science is a process—take the opportunity to educate people on this fact and the implications for shifting trends and outcomes.
- But most of all, be clear, consistent, and understood!

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Our team has completed successful risk communication projects for many organizations. For more information, please visit our website: www.niva.com