



COUNTERING HARMFUL AND MISLEADING HEALTH RUMORS

Implementation Guide

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

PUBLIC HEALTH PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE: Engagement in public health activities that aim to prevent, protect against, quickly respond to, and recover from public health emergencies.

ESCALATING HEALTH ISSUE: A health event with the potential for increasing misunderstanding or rumors.

SOCIAL LISTENING: The process of tracking information on communication platforms to identify false information or information gaps about an escalating public health issue.

AMPLIFICATION: The process of spreading specific information, whether factual or not, and increasing its reach by sharing and discussing on communication platforms (eg, social media, local news, radio, etc.).

INFORMATION VOID: A lack of reliable or accessible data or information on the health issue of concern.

TRUSTED MESSENGER: Someone who is perceived as reliable, credible, and trustworthy to a target audience.

DEBUNKING: The process of exposing, refuting, or correcting false or misleading information spreading in a community. This includes fact-based, logic-based, and source-based debunking.

PREBUNKING: The act of addressing or refuting potential false information before an individual is exposed. This involves educating people about common tactics of deception or manipulation, encouraging critical thinking, and engaging target audiences.

INOCULATION: The process of teaching people to identify and refute misleading or false information.

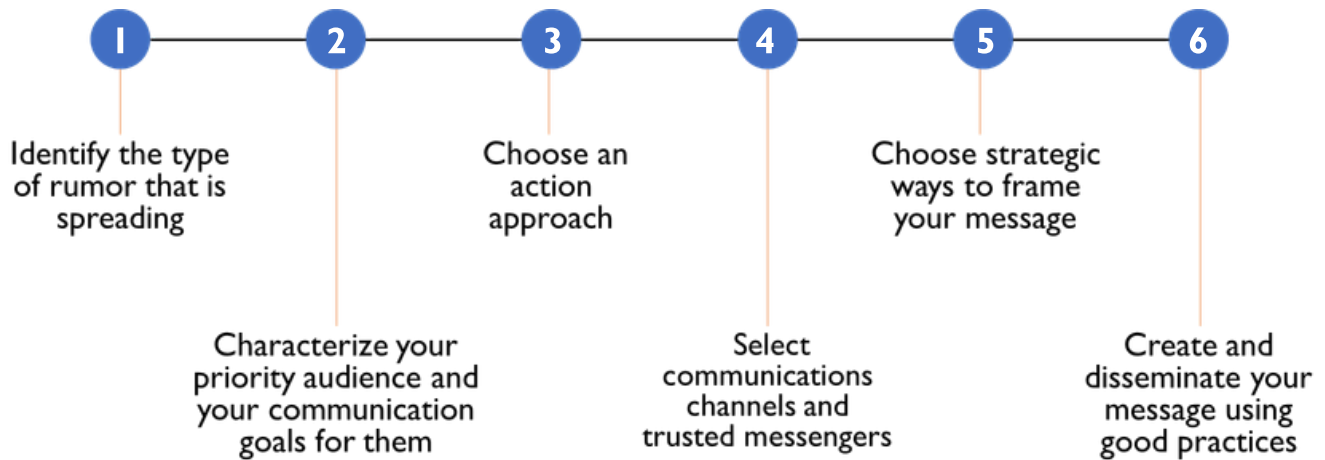
HEALTH/SCIENCE/MEDIA LITERACY: A person's ability to effectively access, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and use information to make informed decisions about their health, scientific facts, and media content.

PLAIN LANGUAGE: Written or spoken communication that uses clear and concise language to help the intended audience understand the first time they encounter it.

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TAKE ACTION TO ADDRESS RUMORS



I. IDENTIFY THE TYPE OF RUMOR THAT IS SPREADING

Although rumors may seem unique, they often follow **common patterns**. These may involve concerns about the safety of medical interventions, changes in health guidelines, the severity or cause of a health condition, or the trustworthiness of health agencies and individuals implementing interventions. Some rumors also stigmatize certain populations as responsible for spreading a disease or create confusion around previous messaging. To address rumors effectively, it is important to **understand** their nature, **deconstruct** their intent, and **identify** key information that can dispel them. Consider the following questions to guide your thinking:

1. What is the rumor? 2. What type of rumor is it? 3. What level of risk does this rumor pose?

2. IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE AND COMMUNICATION GOALS


Upon detecting rumors, identify the audiences you want to focus on. Often, these are groups of people who may be most impacted or would be most likely to believe a rumor. Goals for these populations often include **raising awareness of accurate health information**, increasing your audience's **ability to detect false information**, and/or providing **factual alternative explanations**. Potential **audiences** may include:

 General audiences

 Partner organizations

 People spreading rumors

 People disproportionately impacted by the rumor

 People who are most likely to believe the rumor

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3. CHOOSE AN ACTION APPROACH



Amplify accurate information

Share accessible, accurate, tailored, and culturally appropriate information from first-hand or other trusted sources, or point people to credible sources of information.

Considerations:

- ✓ Use messages that strongly appeal to morals and emotions
- ✗ Don't ignore possible problems, such as others twisting your messages or discrediting you



Fill information voids

Quickly provide easy-to-understand, credible, accessible, and correct information to answer common questions or fill knowledge gaps.

Considerations:

- ✓ Act quickly before other actors can fill the void with misinformation
- ✗ Don't create generic content that is not tailored to diverse audience needs and beliefs



Leverage trusted messengers and engage communities

Use spokespersons who are trusted by your priority audiences to convey key messages and encourage community participation in health communication.

Considerations:

- ✓ Use an in-group spokesperson to better connect with your intended audience
- ✗ Don't overburden resource-limited community organizations with more unpaid work



Refute, fact check or debunk

Refute false claims by highlighting factual errors, providing alternative explanations, identifying flawed reasoning or logical fallacies, and/or calling into question the credibility of the source of false information.

Considerations:

- ✓ Offer factual alternative explanations when correcting false information
- ✗ Don't prioritize fact-checking rumors if it means you are attacking deeply held beliefs



Prebunk and inoculate

Preemptively refute anticipated false information or manipulation tactics before people are exposed to a rumor to help protect them from believing the rumor when it comes up.

Considerations:

- ✓ Repeat the guidance you want people to follow
- ✗ Don't overcomplicate your response



Improve health and science literacy

Enhance public understanding of scientific and health principles by explaining key concepts and processes, such as common public health terms, how research is done, and how to spot common logical fallacies.

Considerations:

- ✓ Prepare audiences for the possibility that guidance and messages may change
- ✗ Don't replace old information without explaining why it is no longer accurate

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4. SELECT COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND TRUSTED MESSENGERS

The best communications channels for a message that addresses rumors are the platforms on which the rumor is spreading. When choosing your communication channels, consider how accessible your message is for target audience, which channel will maximize your message reach, which channels are popular, user-friendly and trustworthy, and whether you have the right relationships in place. Potential channels may include **social media, websites, partner outreach, in person event, virtual event, or traditional media.**

5. CHOOSE STRATEGIC WAYS TO FRAME YOUR MESSAGE

Audiences interpret messages in diverse ways. Knowing the lenses they use to understand messages can help you choose and frame messaging appropriately. Consider the following message framing techniques:

- **Moral and gain framing:** Match messages to the motivations of audiences, especially framing information that audiences might not accept easily, in a way that aligns with their moral values (moral reframing) and focuses on desirable outcomes or benefits that they get (gain framing).
- **Self-oriented framing:** Appeal to self-serving benefits.
- **Promotion and prevention framing:** Appeal to improving a positive outcome during crisis (promotion framing) but appeal to preventing a negative outcome during non-crisis times (prevention framing).
- **Health consequences framing:** Appeal to health-related consequences of changing behavior.
- **Acknowledging uncertainty:** Share what is known, unknown, and what is being done to fill gaps.

6. CREATE AND DISSEMINATE YOUR MESSAGE USING GOOD PRACTICES

Incorporate good structure, language and tone and visuals practices to construct effective anti-misinformation messages:

- **Structure:** Develop a skeleton format for your message based on your communications channel and create a communication format to use during public presentations of information.
- **Language:** Use everyday words, short sentences, second person point of view, and active voice. Avoid jargon and ensure content is simple, concise, empathetic, memorable, tailored, and impactful.
- **Tone and visuals:** Address claims directly, lead with empathy, and provide detail and context. Add value statements, be intentional with word choice, and select design elements, layouts, color schemes, and images that resonate well with audiences.



To learn more, please see the
Practical playbook for addressing health rumors

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