

Crisis and Risk Communication Essentials for **Public Health Professionals**

Presenter

Meredith Li-Vollmer, PhD

Risk Communication Specialist

Public Health – Seattle & King County

206-263-8704

meredith.li-vollmer@kingcounty.gov



What is risk communication?

The dynamic, interactive process of sharing information strategically and effectively about an issue of high concern to help people:

- ▣ Cope
- ▣ Make informed decisions
- ▣ Understand sensitive issues

What are your risk
communication challenges?

2 Risk Communication Environments



Risk = Hazard + Outrage*

* Peter Sandman, www.psandman.com



What
elevates
emotion?

How people gauge risk

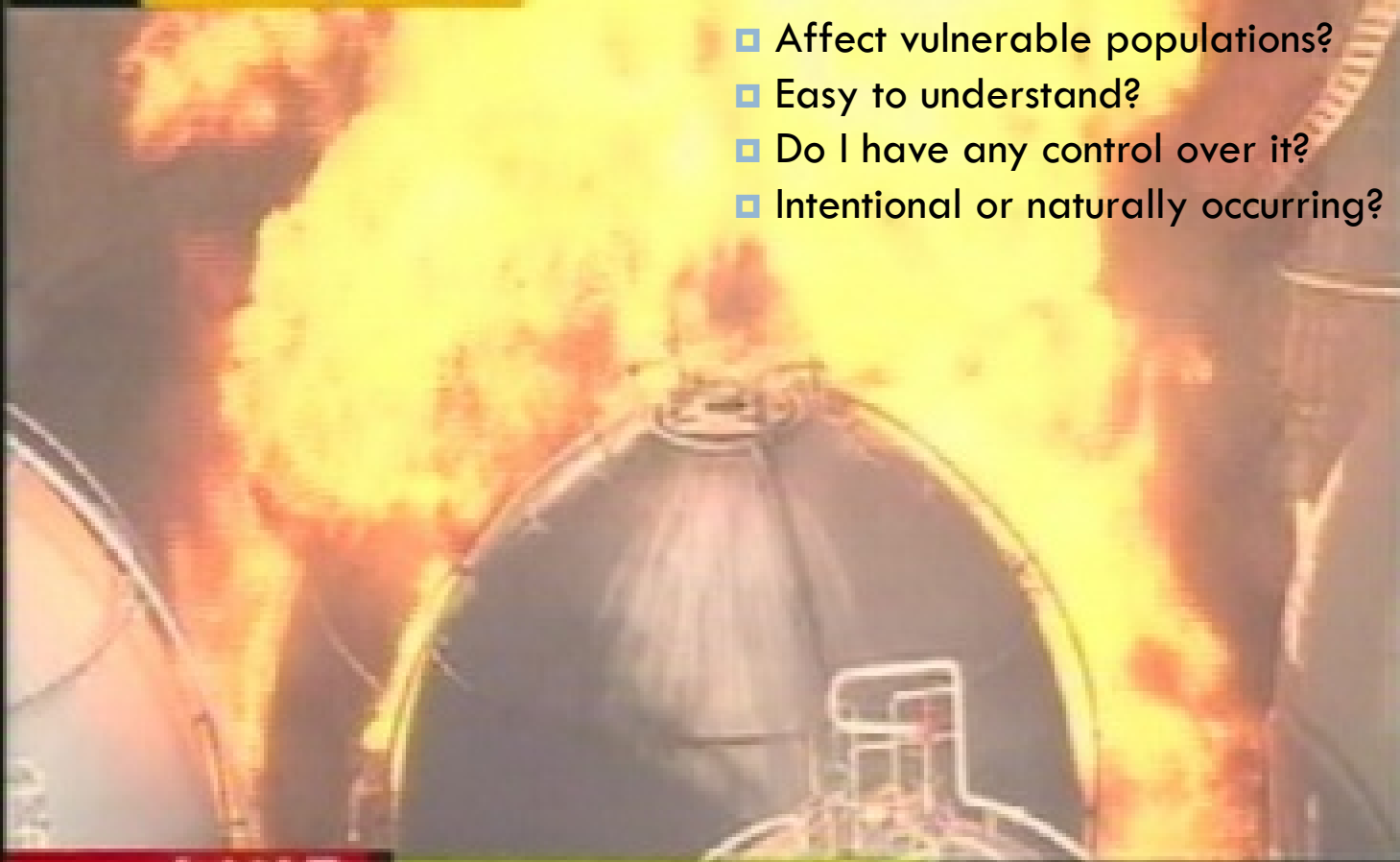
- ▣ Is it familiar?
- ▣ Affect vulnerable populations?
- ▣ Easy to understand?
- ▣ Do I have any control over it?
- ▣ Intentional or naturally occurring?

- ▣ Is it familiar?
- ▣ Affect vulnerable populations?
- ▣ Easy to understand?
- ▣ Do I have any control over it?
- ▣ Intentional or naturally occurring?



Live Breaking News

- Is it familiar?
- Affect vulnerable populations?
- Easy to understand?
- Do I have any control over it?
- Intentional or naturally occurring?



LIVE

BREAKING NEWS

You're watching NHK World's coverage
of the Japan earthquake

APAN

NEWSLINE

24

Brisbane



20/28

Cairns



23/31

Lismore



18/28

18:24
AEST

How does outrage play out?



“mental noise”

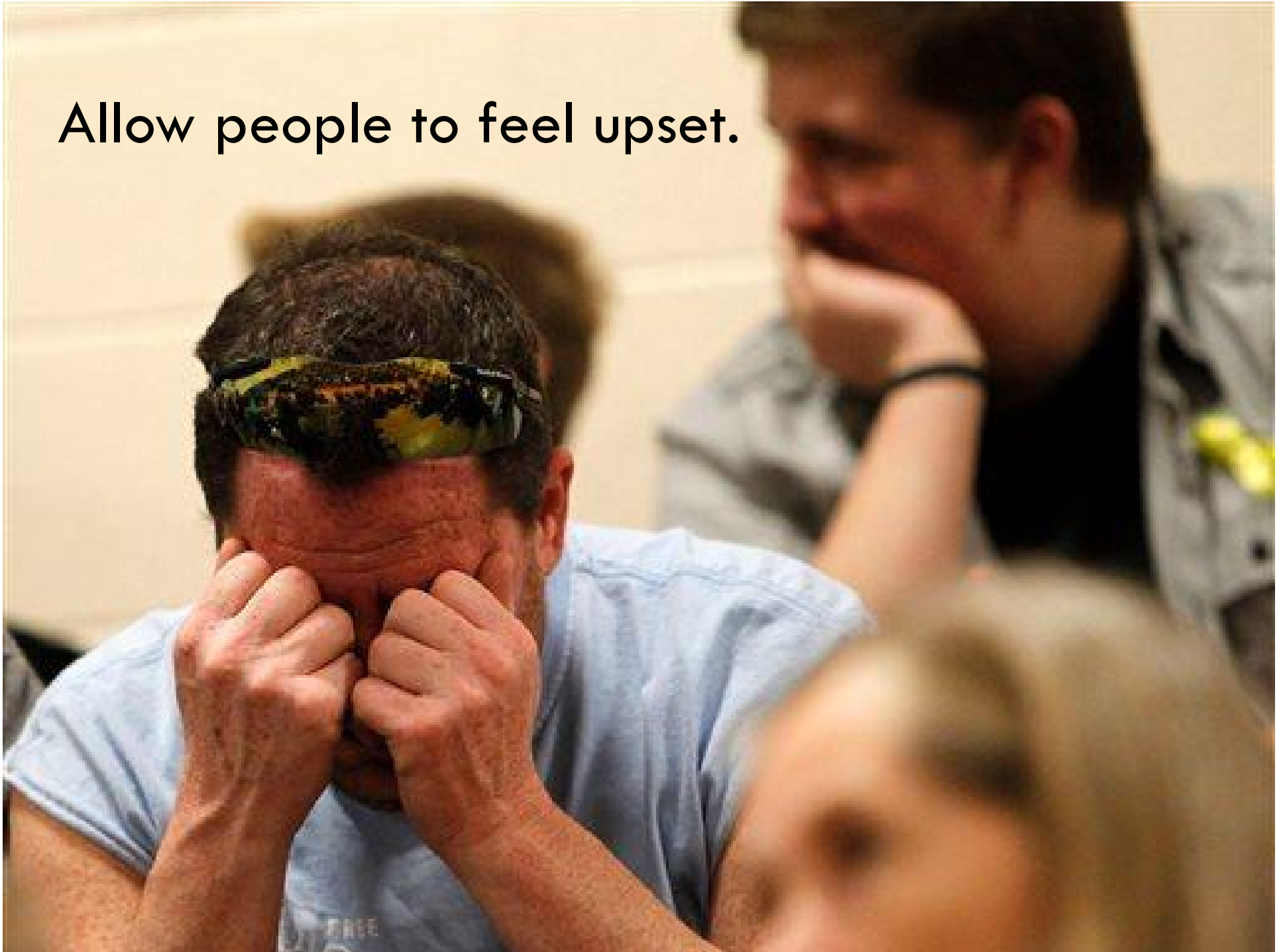
Address the outrage first



Show empathy.
Name what people are
feeling.



Allow people to feel upset.



Give people a choice of actions.

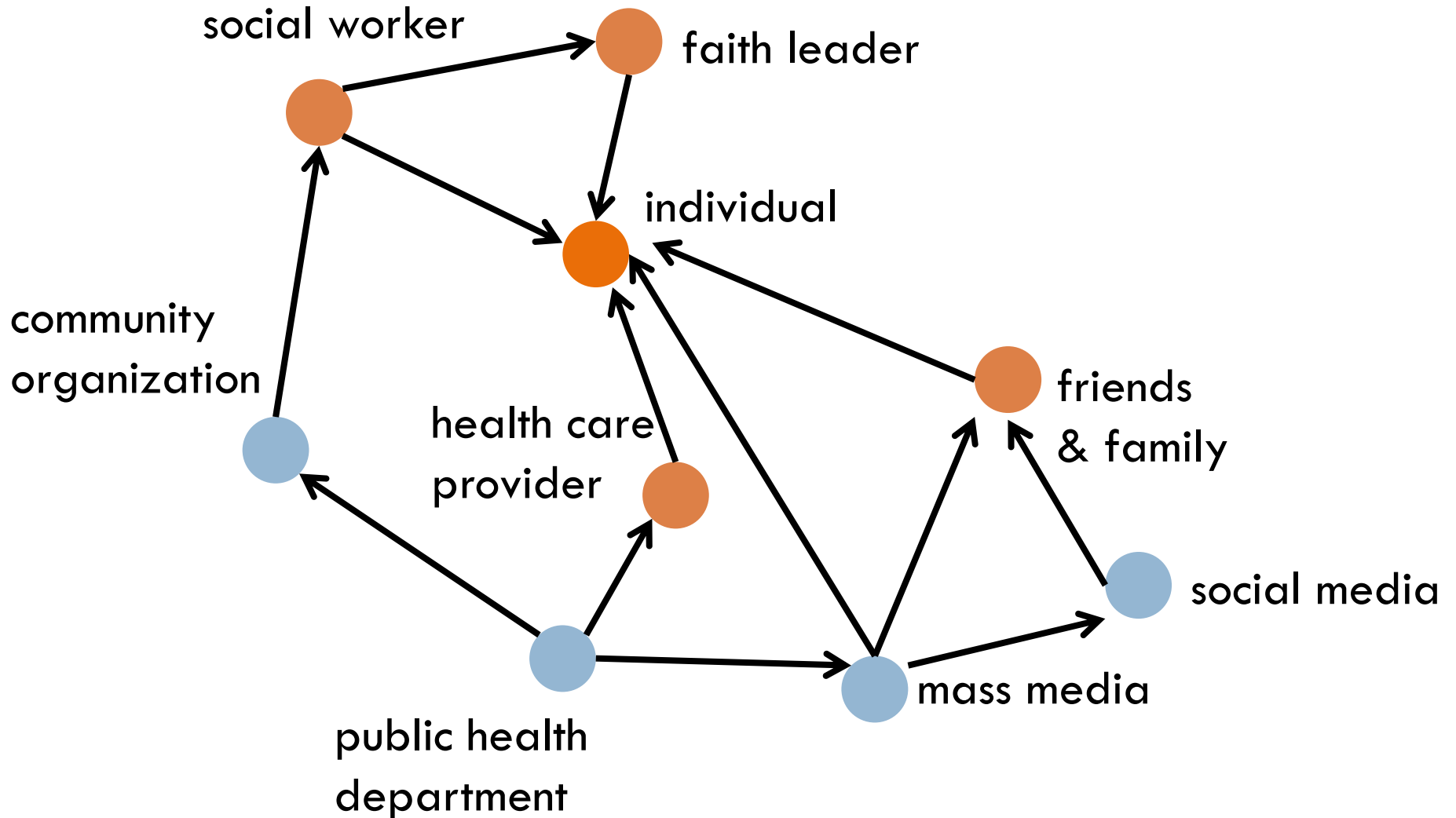
- Prevent the flu by washing your hands frequently, getting plenty of rest, and avoiding crowded places.
- Talk to your employer about plans for sick leave.
- Sign up for email updates from Public Health.

Use repetition.

Use repetition.

Use repetition.

Risk communication is social.





Don't over-reassure

"We are very encouraged that the results from our monitoring of air quality and drinking water conditions in both New York and near the Pentagon show that the public in these areas is not being exposed to excessive levels of asbestos or other harmful substances... I am glad to reassure the people of New York and Washington, D.C. that their air is safe to breathe and their water is safe to drink."

- U.S. EPA Director Christine Todd Whitman,
September 18, 2001

LIVE
SKY FOX

Timing is everything.



What's real? What's credible?



Fill the information void...

...or someone else will.



blah blah blah
vaccine is evil
blah blah blah

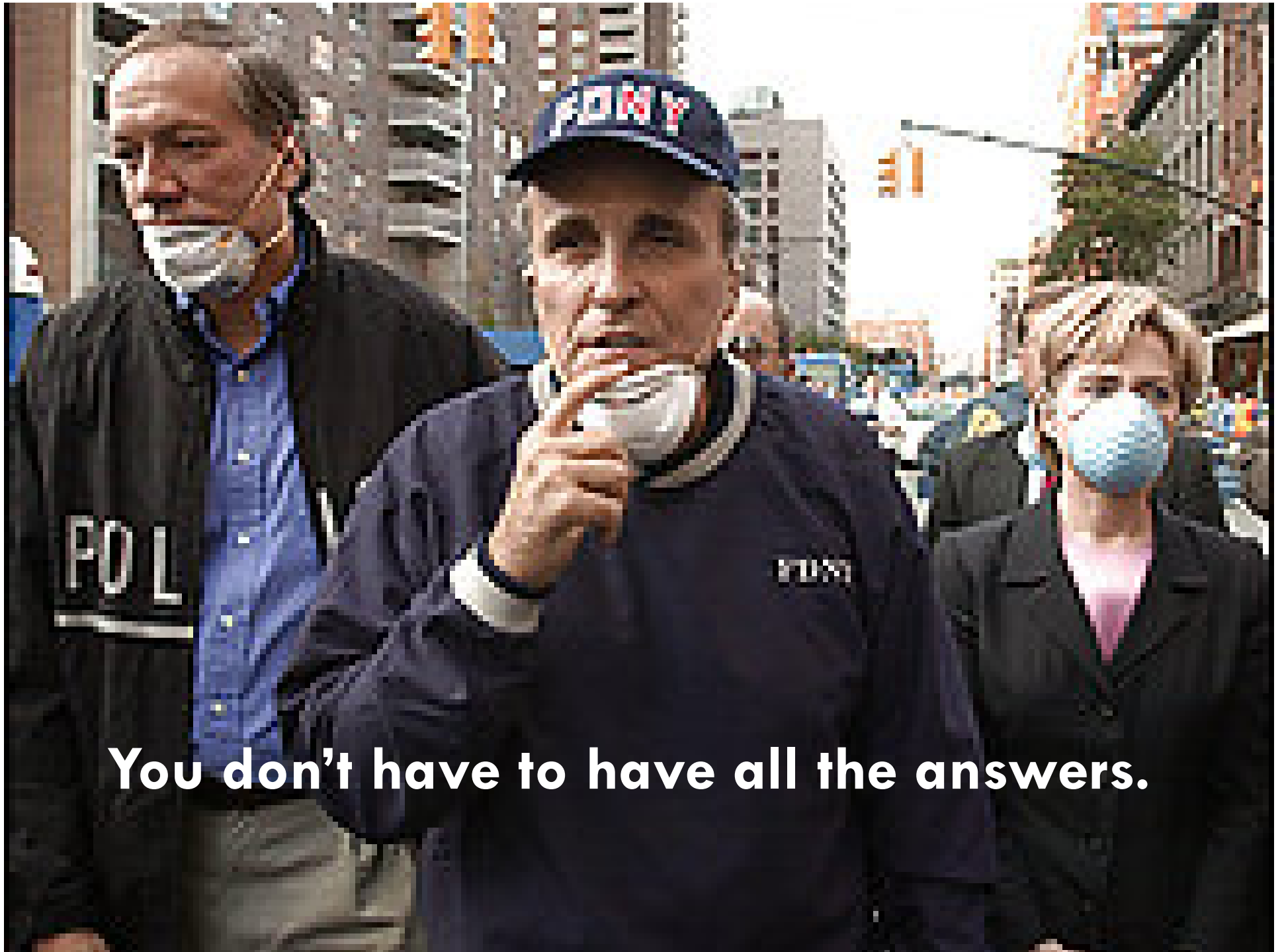
Speak first (ish).



Why do organizations hold back?

King County Executive Sims

King County



You don't have to have all the answers.

First Messages

- 1) An expression of empathy
- 2) What you know: confirmed facts and action steps
- 3) What you don't know
- 4) What you've done, and what you'll be doing next
- 5) Statement of commitment to help people through crisis
- 6) Where to go for more information

Developing the message



Keep it simple.

What do people want to know?

- Am I or my family in danger?
- How can I protect myself and my family?
- What happened?
- What caused this?
- What's being to done to keep us safe?

Live Breaking News

What do they *not* want to know?

- ❑ What systems does FDA have in place to protect the U.S. food supply?
- ❑ What products come to the U.S. from Japan?
- ❑ What specific tests is FDA using?
- ❑ What does FDA look for when it tests food for radioactive contamination?

LIVE

BREAKING NEWS

Which would you rather read?

What is carbon monoxide?

Carbon monoxide is a poisonous and odorless gas that cannot be seen or smelled and that can kill a person in minutes. Carbon monoxide is produced whenever any fuel such as gas, oil, kerosene, wood, or charcoal is burned. If appliances that burn fuel are maintained and used properly, the amount of carbon monoxide produced is usually not hazardous. Hundreds of people die accidentally every year from carbon monoxide poisoning caused by appliances that are not used properly or that are malfunctioning. Even more people die from carbon monoxide produced from idling cars. Carbon monoxide can build up so quickly that victims are unaware before they change their behavior.

Once inhaled, carbon monoxide:

- Decreases the capacity of blood to carry oxygen;
- Can cause permanent brain damage;
- Can cause chest pain or heart attacks in people with heart disease.

What are the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning?

- Headache
- Dizziness
- Fatigue
- Weakness
- Confusion
- Nausea

How can I prevent carbon monoxide poisoning?

- Never burn charcoal inside homes, tents, campers, vans, trucks, garages, or mobile homes. Do not burn charcoal in the fireplace in your home.
- Never use gas line powered equipment indoors. Adequate ventilation is required when using gas line powered equipment. Because it's difficult to determine how much ventilation is "adequate," there are always use-it-or-lose-it equipment test floors.
- Never use a gas oven to heat your home, even for a short time.
- Never idle a car in a garage, even when the garage door is open.
- Never sleep in a room while using an unvented gas or kerosene heater.
- Make sure handrails and fuel are in good condition and not blocked.
- Have oil and gas appliances and fireplaces as well as wood stoves checked every year by a licensed professional.
- Carbon monoxide warning devices may provide additional protection, but should not replace the other prevention steps.

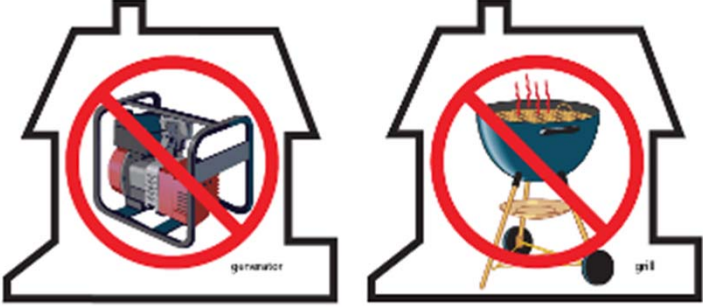
What should be done if you suspect someone has been poisoned by carbon monoxide?


- Move the person to a place with fresh air immediately.
- Take the person to an emergency room and tell them that you suspect carbon monoxide poisoning.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE ELECTRICITY

PREVENT POISONING FROM CARBON MONOXIDE

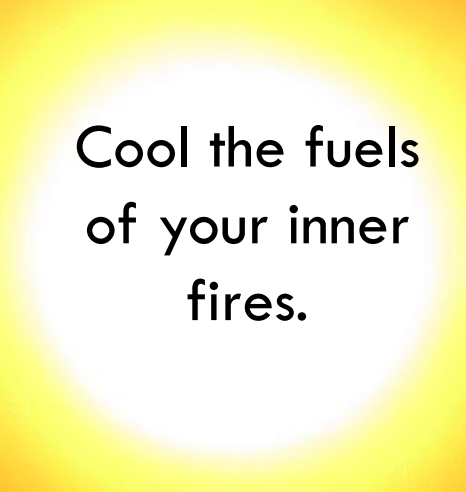
- **ONLY** use a generator outdoors and far from open windows and vents
- **NEVER** use a generator indoors, in garages or carports
- **NEVER** cook or heat inside on a charcoal or gas grill



Public Health
Seattle & King County 

www.metrokc.gov/health

Warning: Extreme Heat Event



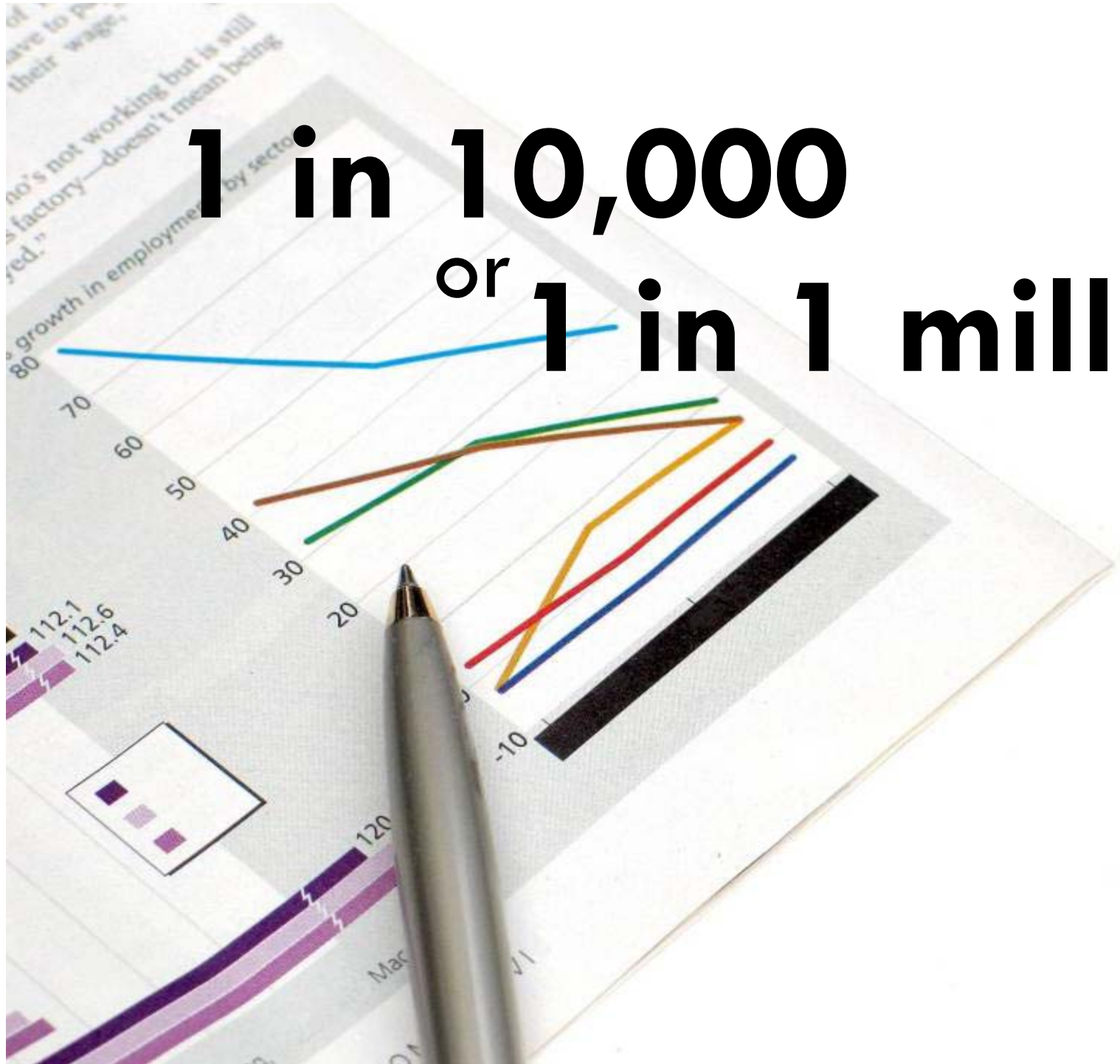
Cool the fuels
of your inner
fires.

Plain language please!

1 in 10,000

or

1 in 1 million?



Explain why.

Some people are at much greater risk of serious health problems if they get the flu.

pregnant has asthma has heart disease just had chemotherapy

young child

Many people who are at higher risk look healthy.

If you go to school or other gatherings when you are still spreading the virus, you will put others at risk.

SALE

COUGH

Let's give it a try.

Mobile sources are responsible for direct emissions of air toxics and contribute to precursor emissions which react to form secondary pollutants.

Questions? Comments?

More information

- CDC Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication (CERC)
<http://emergency.cdc.gov/CERC>
- The Peter Sandman Risk Communication Site:
petersandman.com
- Public Health – Seattle & King County Advanced
Practice Center <http://www.apctoolkits.com>