



COVID-19 Mental Health and Wellbeing Messaging: Communication Guidelines

The outbreak of COVID-19 has and will continue to impact the entire nation and will have considerable impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of Australians. As we work together to support individuals and communities through this challenging time, it will be important to have clear communication that includes simple and tailored key messages. Using existing resources, NMHC have put together some guiding principles that may be helpful in framing relevant communications with your stakeholders, as well as considerations when discussing the potential mental health impacts of COVID-19. The positioning of these guidelines is so that professional communicators adopt a Do No Harm approach when communicating about COVID-19 to any and all audiences.

Guiding Principles for Communicating effectively during a pandemic

- Follow the three rules of communication – Is it relevant? Is it clear? Is it targeted?
- **Be purposeful** – have clear objectives on why you are communicating and what you want people to get out of it. Ensure there is a call to action. Do not communicate for the sake of communicating.
- **Context is key** – consider the phase of the pandemic, as well as the demographics and diverse needs of your community. While we have highlighted the need to stay connected online; experience, access and skills in using technology will vary greatly among your stakeholders. Consider the practical challenges in the community, such as; access to internet and technology, digital literacy, self-isolation, competing pressures such as employment, housing, physical health, finance, relationships. Consider the psychological challenges people may be facing which can impact processing of communication, such as; reduced ability to concentrate, difficulty in retention of information. Consider the environment you are trying to communicate in; what is the current phase and latest health information being disseminated? These should help guide your communication.
- **Language matters** – make all communication clear, consistent and uncomplicated. Get to know your community and their understanding of mental health. In some instances, language around ‘mental health and distress’ is not always helpful - ‘wellbeing’ and ‘practical and emotional tips and support’ may be better received words. When publishing content or engaging with media, always refer to the [Mindframe Guidelines](#) for safe reporting on mental ill health and the [WHO Social Stigma Guidelines for COVID-19](#) which outline safe language to use when discussing COVID-19 to avoid social stigma.
- **Less is more** – include short, sharp and relevant information at appropriate times, rather than providing all available information at once. This will avoid information overload.
- **Be practical** – provide practical information and tips that can be implemented in people’s day to day lives. Remember, while there is a lot of information currently available, in times of crisis or uncertainty, people need clear direction, guidance and practical support.
- **Use examples** – where appropriate, use relatable examples of how people can apply tips and information to their everyday lives to support their mental health and wellbeing.
- **Be accessible** – we live in a diverse country, so make your communication accessible by considering the language, format and channels used and aim to meet Accessibility Guidelines for online content.
- **Keep it factual** – with everything you share, ask is this Reliable? Trusted? Verified? While information and advice will develop and change over time, to keep pace with the progress of COVID-19, refer to evidence-based and reputable sources of information that are updated regularly, such as [Australian Government Department of Health](#) and [World Health Organisation](#). Avoid sharing sensationalised information. People need calm, measured and trusted information during this time.



- **Get creative** – in the same way we are encouraging individuals and communities to be creative in the ways they stay connected, try and be creative in how you communicate with your stakeholders. Consider role modelling some of the ways to stay connected in your content creation and dissemination.
- **Repeat frequently** – repetition is important in times of distress; the more times people hear or see a message, the more likely they are to retain the information for when they need it.
- **Reach out** – consider how you can adopt an outreach approach, as well as response, for those who may not be proactively seeking support.
- **Ask and listen** – consult with your stakeholders and community on the type of information they need and how best to provide this to them. Show that you have listened by tailoring your information to suit this need. As the situation changes, review and update information.
- **Find the right balance** – share personal stories of hope, acts of kindness and creative ways people are connecting in communities.
- **Encourage help seeking** – include clear and relevant help seeking information on all communication for people to access support when they need it. A good starting point is [Head to Health](#), so you might want to include this and other audience specific support information.
- Complete a communications needs assessment when developing any communications to ensure it is relevant, clear and targeted (an example of a CNA is on the following page)

Communications Needs Assessment (CNA)

This table is an example of a Communications Needs Assessment, pulled from existing resources for natural disasters, pandemics and crisis communications.

Issue	Questions you should ask yourself
Contextual	What broader context are you trying to communicate in? (<i>think about the community, the environmental challenges, practical challenges and the psychological challenges</i>) How are people going, generally speaking? (<i>think about the phase of the pandemic, and the conversations in your community</i>) Has the environment or situation changed since last communicating?
Stakeholder	Who are you trying to communicate with? What is the demographic of your audience? What is their understanding of mental health? What special needs do they have, if any? What assets can we build on to make communication more effective? What are the key issues/ problems the stakeholders have? How do they access information usually, and what way would they access this information now?
Objectives	What is it that you are trying to achieve by communicating? Is there a clear call to action for people?
Method	What method(s) of communication is best suited to the issues identified above? (<i>consider the pandemic phase, access, and community demographics</i>) - Methods include; emails, newsletters, noticeboards, local newspaper, local radio, website, social media, flyers, fact sheets, infographics, video
Feedback	How can we ensure that issues or views from the stakeholders are fed back to us? (<i>is there a communication channel for people to get in touch and further inform future communications?</i>)



Guiding Principles for Communicating about Mental Health impacts

- Acknowledge the widespread impacts that COVID-19 is having on all aspects of people's lives
- Acknowledge that as a nation, as communities and as individuals we have faced extraordinary challenges in recent months with drought, bushfires, floods and COVID-19
- Share that it is natural for people to feel unsettled, uncertain, confused, anxious and overwhelmed
- Explain that there is no 'right' way to feel and it is OK to not be OK right now – many people are experiencing normal reactions to an extraordinary situation
- Encourage people to check in with themselves and reach out to those around them, validating the important role of communities, connection and compassionate responses in challenging times
- Explain that social distancing is better understood as 'physical distancing'. Social distancing does not mean we must disconnect from one another completely; in fact, it is incredibly important that we remain emotionally and socially connected during this time
- Encourage people to build communities and be creative in the ways they remain connected with friends, family, colleagues and neighbours
- Reinforce that we all have a role to play and it is important for people to continue to follow expert public health advice and take necessary precautionary measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19
- Direct people to accurate and updated information from credible sources to help with maintaining perspective; [Australian Government COVID-19 Health Alert](#) and [World Health Organisation](#)
- Encourage people to maintain a balance in media coverage, and to focus on what is known and what can be controlled in this situation
- Emphasise that while the signs and symptoms of distress can look different for everyone, connecting with support and talking to a friend, family member or counsellor as early as possible is encouraged
- Provide practical and emotional tips, taking into consideration the pandemic phase and demographics of your community
- Ensure as a mental health and suicide prevention sector, that people are following expert advice and sign post where people can get access to evidence-based information about support
- Remind people that the situation is temporary and the uncertainty will not last forever
- Remind people that medical, scientific and public health experts around the world are working hard to contain the virus and treat those affected
- Acknowledge the strength and resilience of our communities and share examples of community support
- Share positive community stories that role model acts of kindness, instil hope and promote help seeking behaviours
- Include clear and relevant help seeking information on all communications for people to access support when they need it (please see support information and resources below)

Mental Health Support

Below is a simplified 'call to action' for accessing support. 'Mental health' has not been used in the title and instead 'support' and 'talking' have been used as softer entry points. Depending on your service and your stakeholders, this could be tailored in language.

COVID-19 support:

This is a difficult time, you don't have to go it alone, support is available.



Go online for information and support:

- **Australian Government COVID-19 Health Alert:** www.health.gov.au
Dedicated live website updated regularly with recent alerts and health information.
- **Head to Health:** <https://headtohealth.gov.au/covid-19-support>
Mental health information, support and resources for COVID-19. This will be updated regularly.



If you need to talk now, these services are available 24/7:

- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636
- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800
- National Coronavirus Helpline 1800 020 080