

**American University of Beirut  
Faculty of Health Sciences  
Department of Health Promotion and Community Health**

**HPCH 207 (2 credits)  
Risk Communication in Public Health Practice  
Spring 2021-2022**

**Instructor**

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Office hours: by appointment

**Class Time:** Monday, 1-3pm

**Location:** VD Room 332

**Course Description:**

In this course students will learn the basic concepts of risk communication and its applications in public health. Risk communication is defined as the “process of exchanging information about the nature, magnitude, significance, or control of risk”<sup>1</sup>. Following a series of hazardous and chemical accidents, risk communication emerged in the 1980s as a distinct specialized field of communication management and public relations focusing on tactics used to adopt before, during, and after disasters or outbreak situations<sup>2</sup>.

In this course, we will cover the basic principles of theories of risk perception and discuss their applications in public health responses. We will include elements of risk message framing, public engagement, using traditional and social media, as well as ethical considerations of public communication.

At the end of this course, students will be able to apply these concepts to design messages to convey risk information in public health by producing messages in various formats, including fact sheets, press releases, video scripts, text messages, media kits. The final presentation will consist of a mock press conference on a pre-determined topic.

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<sup>1</sup> Covello, V. T. (1992). *Risk communication: An emerging area of health communication research*. In S. A. Deetz (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 15* (pp. 359-373). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

<sup>2</sup> Sheppard, Ben, Melissa Janoske, & Brooke Liu (2012). *Understanding Risk Communication Theory: A Guide for Emergency Managers and Communicators*. Report to Human Factors/Behavioral Sciences Division, Science and Technology Directorate (START), U.S. Department of Homeland Security. College Park, MD.

## Competencies and Learning Objectives:

This course objectives and learning activities are aligned with some of the foundational competencies and cross-cutting experiences required for a Public Health Bachelor's degree, according to the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH).

### **CEPH competencies:**

1) Foundational competencies: ability to communicate public health information, in both oral and written forms, through a variety of media and to diverse audiences; b) the ability to locate, use, evaluate and synthesize public health information.

2) Cross-cutting experiences: community dynamics, critical thinking and creativity, independent work and a personal work ethic, networking, professionalism, teamwork and leadership.

### **Course Learning Objectives (LOs)**

By the end of this course, students will **be able to**:

1. Distinguish risk assessment, risk analysis, and risk management as related to major areas of public health. (C1)
2. Describe the major psychological, technical, and cultural/sociological approaches to explaining and analyzing the process of risk communication, to communicate effectively with relevant stakeholders, including the media. (C4)
3. Apply the principles of risk communication to design effective risk messages to better manage communication challenges inherent in areas of public health practice (C6)
4. Use context-based communication strategies for communicating risk issues in public, face-to-face encounters, and with the media. (C5)
5. Use effective oral and written communication in memos, and presentations appropriate to the needs and abilities of specific audiences. (C5)
6. Demonstrate effective communication skills for multicultural, socially and economically diverse audiences. (C5)

## Assessment of student learning:

Below is a general overview of the assignments used to assess the progress of student learning. Guidelines and specific information about the assignments will be provided on Moodle two weeks to one month before the due date. The summary of the assessments and their weights towards the final grade is provided in **Table 1** below.

### **Active participation – 10%**

Students will be evaluated on the quality of their contributions to general class discussions and small group discussions. The grading rubric is posted on Moodle.

### **Assignment 1: Risk communication strategy (group) - 30%**

Students will work in groups to develop a risk communication strategy on a selected topic where they will analyze the risk and audience characteristics including risk perception and develop audience specific communication strategies. The detailed guideline will be shared on Moodle.

### **Assignment 2: Developing a message map and communication materials (individual) – 30%**

For this assignment, students will work individually on the same topic they selected as a group for assignment A2. They will identify and choose ONE priority population affected by that health or environmental issue making sure that each member in the group selects a different audience of interest. They will then develop a message map for the basic risk messages to be communicated to that audience. They will then choose one of the following to communicate ONE key message and develop the material: 1) a short radio or TV script; 2) a message for a poster; 3) social media post. Detailed guidelines will be posted on Moodle.

### **Assignment 3: Press conference (individual 15% - group 15%)**

Students will resume working within their groups on the same topic. In a role-playing situation, students will do a mock-up press conference about a risk situation related to their chosen topic; their colleagues and instructor will act as journalists and will raise questions. Students will work in groups and each student will be responsible of preparing one key point and of answering to potential questions around this point that the spokesperson (a member of the group selected by her/his peers) can use during the press conference. This part will be submitted individually. The group then will develop a press kit including a press release which will be evaluated for the group grade. Detailed guidelines and various materials on preparing press conferences and press kits will be posted on Moodle.

Table 1. Summary of the Course Assessments and their Weight

<b>Evaluation</b>	<b>Grade (individual)</b>	<b>Grade (group)</b>	<b>Learning Outcomes</b>
Active participation	10%		1-6
Assignment 1: Risk communication strategy		30%	1,2,4
Assignment 2: Message map and communication materials	30%		3
Assignment 3: Press conference	15%	15%	4, 5, 6
<b>Total</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>45%</b>	

#### **Course Format:**

- All sessions will be given in-person unless circumstances do not allow it. The instructor will communicate any urgent changes in due time.
- All materials will be posted on Moodle which is the main resource page that you need to use for all information and materials related to the course.
- For course related announcements, the instructor will communicate through Moodle forum posts which students will also receive via email. Students can communicate back with the instructor through email.

## Course Ethics and Etiquette:

1. **Active participation.** The quality and amount of learning in this course will largely depend on the active participation during class where students will be working in smaller groups. Students are expected to have prepared the readings before class sessions and according to the schedule in this syllabus. Students are responsible for being aware of related announcements, which are shared on Moodle.
2. **We are here to learn.** Discussion is fundamental to open minds. Learning means that sometimes we might be right and some other times we might be wrong. Keep an open mind; be respectful of others' opinions and ideas.
3. **Punctuality.** It is important to come to class on time in order to avoid disruptions and missing important information. Punctuality means also meeting deadlines. Late assignments will not be tolerated. Please discuss any specific circumstance with the instructor.
4. **Writing:** Written communication is essential for communication, health education and behavioral science. Proofread your written assignments for typos and spelling and grammatical errors and correct these. Students who do not do so will see this reflected in their grades. Contact **AUB Writing Center** to improve your writing skills.
5. **Academic Integrity.** Education is demanding and time management is essential. Students should not hesitate to use available resources without cutting corners. This university does not tolerate any form of cheating or plagiarism. Students must review the Student Code of Conduct in the handbook provided by AUB (p. 44) to be familiar with definitions and penalties. When in doubt, students should contact instructors to avoid future complications. Penalties include failing marks on the assignments, suspension or expulsion from university, and a permanent mention in the student's records.
6. **Accessible Education Office (AEO):** The Accessible Education Office (AEO) coordinates academic accommodations and services for all eligible AUB students with disabilities (such as ADHD, learning difficulties, mental health conditions, chronic or temporary medical conditions, and others). If you have a disability for which you wish to request accommodations at the department, faculty or university level, please contact AEO as soon as possible. Once you register with our office, we will assist you in receiving appropriate accommodations and will liaise with your instructors and any related entity to best support your needs. AEO is located in West Hall room 314, and can be reached by phone at 1-350000 ext. 3246 or by email: [accessibility@aub.edu.lb](mailto:accessibility@aub.edu.lb). Information about our services can be found at: <https://www.aub.edu.lb/SAO/Pages/Accessible-Education.aspx>
7. AUB is committed to facilitating a campus free of all forms of discrimination including sex/gender-based harassment prohibited by Title IX. The University's non-discrimination policy applies to, and protects, all students, faculty, and staff. If you think you have experienced discrimination or harassment, including sexual misconduct, we encourage you to tell someone promptly. If you speak to a faculty or staff member about an issue such as harassment, sexual violence, or discrimination, the information will be kept as private as possible, however, faculty and designated staff are required to bring it to the attention of the University's Equity/Title IX Coordinator. Faculty can refer you to fully confidential resources, and you can find information and contacts at [www.aub.edu.lb/titleix](http://www.aub.edu.lb/titleix). **To report an incident**, contact the University's Equity/Title IX Coordinator Ms. Mitra Tauk at 01-350000 ext. 2514, or [titleix@aub.edu.lb](mailto:titleix@aub.edu.lb). An anonymous report may be submitted online via EthicsPoint at [www.aub.ethicspoint.com](http://www.aub.ethicspoint.com).

## Course Readings:

### Textbook

Lundgren, R. E., & McMakin, A. H. (2013). *Risk communication: A handbook for communicating environmental, safety, and health risks* (5th ed.). Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons. (The e-book version is available through AUB library e-resources).

### Additional Readings and Resources:

Additional readings (journal and popular press articles) will supplement the course textbook and will be included in course sessions, as noted in the schedule below.

### Readings:

- Krause NM, Freiling I, Beets B, Brossard D (2020) Fact-checking as risk communication: the multi-layered risk of misinformation in times of COVID-19, *Journal of Risk Research*, 23:7-8, 1052-1059, DOI: 10.1080/13669877.2020.1756385
- Ochea A. Ataguba & John E. Ataguba (2020) Social determinants of health: the role of effective communication in the COVID-19 pandemic in developing countries, *Global Health Action*, 13:1, 1788263, DOI: 10.1080/16549716.2020.1788263
- Clark-Ginsberg A, Petrun Sayers E. (2020) Communication missteps during COVID-19 hurt those already most at risk. *J Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 28:482–484.
- McComas K (2006) Defining Moments in Risk Communication Research: 1996–2005, *Journal of Health Communication*, 11:1, 75-91, DOI: 10.1080/10810730500461091
- Palenchar MJ, Heath R (2007) Strategic risk communication: Adding value to society, *Public Relations Review*, 33(2): 120-129.

### Manuals and guidance documents:

- World Health Organization. Communicating risk in public health emergencies. A WHO guideline for emergency risk communication (ERC) policy and practice. Available at: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/risk-communications>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Crisis and emergency risk communication (CERC). 2014 edition. Available at: <https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/manual/index.asp>
- World Health Organization. RCCE Action plan guidance COVID-19 preparedness and response. Available at: [https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/risk-communication-and-community-engagement-\(rcce\)-action-plan-guidance](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/risk-communication-and-community-engagement-(rcce)-action-plan-guidance)
- WHO Outbreak communication guidelines. 2020. Available at: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/risk-communications/publications>
- Gamhewage G. An introduction to risk communication. WHO. 2014. Available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/an-introduction-to-risk-communication>

### Weblinks:

- <https://www.who.int/emergencies/risk-communications>
- <https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/index.asp>
- <https://www.who.int/emergencies/risk-communications/publications>
- <https://www.who.int/about/communications/credible-and-trusted>
- <https://www.who.int/about/communications/credible-and-trusted>
- <https://www.psandman.com/articles/covello.htm>
- <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/promoting-interest/press-conference/main>
- <https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication>

## Class Schedule and Readings:

Sessions	Topics Covered and Activities	Readings	LOs
1/Jan 24	<i>Introduction to the course</i> <i>Introduction to Risk Communication</i>	McComas 2006	
2/Jan 31	<i>Approaches to communicate risk</i>	Chapter 2 Palenchar 2007	1, 2
3/Feb 7	<i>Barriers to effective risk communication</i>	Chapter 4 Krause et al, 2020	1, 2
4/Feb 14	<i>Principles of risk communication</i>	Chapter 6 Clark-Ginsberg 2020	1, 2
5/Feb 21	<i>Risk communication during public health crisis and emergencies</i>	Ochega et al, 2020	1, 2
6/Feb 28	<i>Planning risk communication</i>	Chapters 7, 8	1, 2
7/Mar 7	<i>Legislative and ethical considerations</i>	Chapters 3, 5	1, 2
<b>Mar 10</b>	<b>Assignment 1: Risk communication strategy is due</b>		<b>1,2,4</b>
8/Mar 14	<i>Methods of risk communication</i> -Information materials, visual representations, face-to-face communication (spokesperson), news media	Chapter 10	1-3
9/Mar 21	<i>Information materials and visual presentations</i>	Chapters 13, 14	3, 4
10/Mar 28	<i>Face-to-face communication &amp; Stakeholder participation</i> -Application: writing a press release	Chapters 15, 17	3, 4
<b>Apr 1</b>	<b>Assignment 2: Developing a message map and communication materials is due</b>		<b>3</b>
11/Apr 4	<i>Media &amp; technologies for risk communication</i> -Group work: preparing the press kit	Chapters 16, 18	3, 4
12/Apr 11	<i>Evaluating risk communication efforts</i> -Preparing for final press conference	Chapter 19	4-6
<b>May 2</b>	<b>Assignment 3: Press conference</b>		<b>4,5,6</b>