

Coping with Corona & Narratives for Change

This policy brief describes four stages of human reactions to sudden change. What can they tell us about effective change communication for managing sustainability transitions in the current crisis?

As 213 countries and territories worldwide [1] have felt the impact of COVID-19 on their communities with related phases of economic shutdown, social lockdown, and - ultimately - regulated transitions to post-corona life, recurring patterns of human reactions, individual coping mechanisms and government responses became visible. Some patterns seem so universal that they invite us to take a look at analytical frameworks from human psychology that might help interpret waves of similar reactions across communities, regions and even nations.

The field of psychology has frequently examined the recurring stages of coping with abrupt change and sociologists have drawn from psychological theory to analyze collectivized trauma and/or collectivized cohesion & altruism after environmental disasters (see for example Erikson 1996 or Picou et al 1997). Such examinations can help us adapt our change management strategies and narratives in order to support not only people, but also societies, to build back better and come out of the crisis more resilient and sustainable than before.

To get a better feeling for the right timing of certain change narratives, we can turn to the psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross[4] (five stages of grief). Based on Freud's work, she was the first who documented how people usually experience five stages of coping with death and sudden loss. Her groundwork has since been adapted and applied to managing more general situations of shock induced by abrupt change outside of our own realm of influence. This could be, for example, the abrupt bankruptcy of an entire company and subsequent laying off of its workforce. In the context of the Corona crisis and externally imposed health prevention measures (lockdown etc), people have not only lost jobs or work routines from one day to the next, but also have had to give-up on many daily habits and practices (entire lifestyles) that characterized their lives.

Referring to Kübler-Ross' five stages of loss, we have boiled these five stages down to four (as often found in change management theory) in order to provide communicators (including community organizers and politicians interested in sustainable development) with a tool to analyze the reactions of various communities or population groups throughout the Corona crisis. The following overview of the four stages improves not only our understanding of respective human reactions but also indicates appropriate communication strategies during and after the Corona Crisis that support positive social and environmental outcomes.

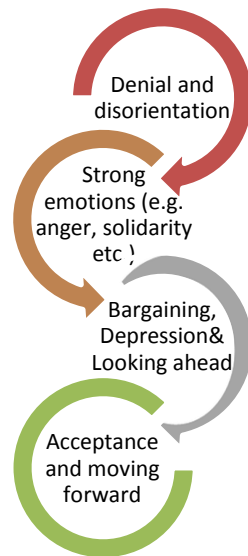


figure 1: 4 stages of coping with change from the top to the bottom (possible to go through the stages in a non-linear manner)

Stage 1: Shock and disorientation

General emotional situation: from denial to (over)coping

When thinking of impulsive reactions from denial and conscious neglect up to boycott and refusal (e.g. of wearing a mask), public figures such as Boris Johnson or Donald Trump come to mind. But reactions of denial also happen on smaller scales and private levels. From denial and boycott on one end of the spectrum to people who ‘over-cope’ in mass reactions on the other end of the spectrum (expressed e.g. in hoarding toilet paper), a combination of anxiety, symbolic conformity and uncertainty about the close future often results in behavior that is steered by fear rather than reason. It’s also possible that people accept what they hear, but hang on to “business as usual” as long as possible, as a result of feeling overwhelmed/under-informed.

Communication tasks in this phase: It is crucial to provide clear communication and evidence-based guidance during this phase. While it might be difficult to describe the situation in its entirety, as shock and disorientation creates incoherent and scattered pictures and senses of what is happening, it is essential for communicators to react in a swift and responsible way, creating transparency (not panic), investigating and disseminating science-based solutions and suggesting potential reactions.

In this phase, easily understandable, transparent and evidence-based information is crucial to prevent conspiracy theories from gaining traction and avoid dangerous inaction (e.g. not taking precautions) on one side, and overreactions and hysteria on the other. At the same time, this phase clearly shows that medium- and long-term education strategies should work toward preventing fake news and building media literacy.

Narratives of change: One example of a good way of narrating change would be to zoom in on particular phenomena and try to deal with one thing at a time. It is also suggested to stay close to the issue (in this case COVID-19) while at the same time staying true to compassionate values that are beneficial to further sustainability (see Common Cause Report by Crompton et al. 2010 [5]). Examples for this could be: showing *solidarity* across age groups by taking precautions, flattening the curve by staying at home to reduce risks of transmission and overloading the health system (= *responsibility/empathy for others*), Do-it-yourself (DIY) masks for private use instead of hoarding medical ones (*sufficiency and creativity*) and communicating appropriately to different audiences (*inclusiveness*).

Stage 2: Anger and other emotional responses

General emotional situation: panic, worry, looking for stability in solidarity, community

This is the phase in which people are on the lookout for reassuring information and (virtual) community. Compassion for affected professions such as nurses, waves of solidarity and a feeling of a shared suffering (e.g. among homeschooling parents) transcend borders and cultures. While feelings of shared community and empathy for others can provide a sense of solidarity, others in this phase might experience similarly strong feelings of anger towards people perceived to be stepping out of line or not considered part of their “circle”. These negative feelings and irrational worries, if not properly aired out and addressed, can lead to (verbal) violence, racism and all forms of irrational discrimination. Italy has experienced both reactions: the first during the wave of balcony singing and the second as some private citizens, but also mayors of several cities turned to fascist-like, angry rants creating irrational narratives of “in-groups” vs. “out-groups”. (joggers vs. homestayors, discriminating people from certain countries or ethnic backgrounds by blaming them irrationally for spreading the virus)

Communication tasks in this phase: Making sense of the situation and fostering inclusiveness and empathy, while avoiding contributing to division and polarization. In order to contribute to an ethical and sustainable management and direction of the crisis, communicators can engage at different levels and on different channels. As this stage is characterized by the longing for reassuring information and community, it is not surprising that in this phase social media is among the most used channels for communication (memes, videos, creative songs etc.). Promoting a sense of compassion and empathy: “we are all in this together”, sharing pain and anxiety, specifically looking beyond one’s own group(s) is important now.

Narratives of change: In this phase communication is still very much anchored in the current crisis. It is crucial to differentiate and explain the reasons for frustration or worries, alleviating fear with arguments that embed the circumstances into a bigger picture. For example, sensitive narratives could focus on essential and critical work in our systems (e.g. nurses, caretakers, teachers, farmers). At the center of the discussion should also be the quest for essential human values and behaviors such as solidarity and altruism. How are they being weakened structurally in the existing system? And which social and environmental behaviors are worth being strengthened?

It is an appropriate moment to take the initiative and lead an action or discussion group on a personal or professional level, to introduce sustainability solutions, or to share a sustainability skill. At the level of regional and national government and media, communicators can advocate for the adoption of measures that could have a far-reaching impact such as the introduction of a UBI, or measuring the wealth of a nation with indicators beyond GDP. It is advisable to pursue narratives that highlight systemic solutions and responsive government action in order to avert individualizing responsibility and guilt. (see [this guardian article](#) about the dangers of individualizing responsibility[6])

Communicators should witness and contextualize failures that are exposed by the current situation and call-out public policies and institutions that embed 'self-interest' values. Solidary and inclusive narratives focusing on intrinsic and compassionate values on the other hand, help to promote sustainability solutions that aim at providing better opportunities and outcomes for all (https://valuesandframes.org/resources/CCF_opportunities_to_create_an_env_step_change.pdf).

Stage 3: Coming to terms with the "new normal"^[o2]

General emotional situation: Looking ahead

This is the phase when communicators can point the finger towards the options of "a new normal" and is therefore the crucial phase for contributing to a sustainability transition. It's the phase when new routines are established.

When coping with death, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross describes an additional/overlapping phase of bargaining. In a crisis like we are seeing now, we can observe such attempts at bargaining between politicians and industries that are trying to go back to business as usual. People also start bargaining with themselves in terms of their own ideas about what a good life is and should be, and what seems possible and not possible in their future. On the one hand, it is not always easy to let go of feelings of resentment (e.g. saying goodbye to an economic model that will not provide resilience to future shocks, or saying goodbye to frequent travelling as an option for 'escapism' (represented in symbols such as long distance travelling to palm trees and white beaches). On the other hand, it takes time to adopt a spirit of looking ahead and e.g. embrace this opportunity to clean up with industries long known as being not future fit, treasure nature nearby and look forward to trying out new lifestyles, work styles and ways of doing business. This stage is the phase in which more and more foresight into the near and far future becomes possible.

Communication tasks in this phase: This is *the* crucial phase to emphasize positive outlooks of the developing situation. At the same time showing empathy for people facing an uncertain future or suffering from cases of the virus in their family remains equally important as it is also the phase in which people as well as organizations can go through levels of depression [7]. By collectively developing visions of a better and healthier future for our planet and our societies that help to avoid renewed unnecessary suffering, this communication challenge between current

problems and future solutions can be bridged. This is the right time to help voice personal narratives from various community members, offering interactive and emancipatory communication possibilities, launch petitions and open letters, and contribute to spreading ideas and seeds of change.

Narratives of change: Create a discussion about positive effects and lessons we have learned, for example, realizing what jobs are truly essential, what community solidarity means and what things people perhaps took for granted previously, but now value tremendously (e.g. nature, parks, sports, social exchange, silence in cities). Making sure to contextualize positive side-effects of the lockdown (e.g. clean air) in order to not glorify the unfortunate causes in which they developed. Asking questions instead of making statements can be a sensitive and constructive way to get people engaged in thinking about desirable futures (e.g. How can we reinforce the positive effects (e.g. clean air, biodiversity restoration) from now on through *designed* changes in economic practices instead of waiting to be forced into it by disasters?)

Researchers can now pull sustainability transition research out of their file cabinets, share learnings from the past and present (highlighting existing solutions), and update scenarios for a better future. Getting out numbers and analyzing the positive aspects, while making sure to help people with connecting the dots will provide a bridge between current challenges, related learnings and potential positive outcomes.

To visualize possible actions for better human and planetary health, this is also an appropriate time to foster art & science partnerships at the grassroots level that help to capture citizens' narratives and bring to light sustainability initiatives to decision makers (see [Creative \(Climate\) Communication](#), Max Boykoff, 2020).

Seeds of change can furthermore be spread through positive and creative communication tools such as poems and songs or through practical experiences such as telling people about the experienced benefits of better air quality, regular self-care (home exercise, meditation, DIY) and social and solidarity interaction (new friendships with neighbors).

'Looking ahead' as a communication strategy can also prove valuable. When in isolation, people tend to look back at moments of experienced happiness, but also to look ahead to think about happy moments 'to be'. This process of anticipation can be used constructively (<https://scorai.org/sustainability-through-time-travel/> & New York Times) to think about the future as a sustainable future. When what is considered 'normal' is disrupted anyway, we might as well take the opportunity to think about what a good, sustainable life would entail (from more system-oriented actions, such as different economic models, to more individual and collective ideas about what a good life is all about, and how it can be redefined to be sustainable).

Good examples for this are the Italian video that portrays all phases of grief in four minutes and concludes with emphasizing the importance of changing the course of humanity and turning towards a future in which well-being, solidarity, collaboration and sufficiency are the key for long-term happiness. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7svFKMzlfk> (Hello, I am Covid-19 writing you this letter - turn on subtitles) or the video of a british father that - several years from now -

tells his kid a good night story about how humanity had chosen a new and more sustainable pathway when arriving at the historic turning point of COVID-19.:
<https://youtu.be/Nw5KQMXDiM4>

Stage 4: Acceptance and moving forward

General emotional situation: Longing for (a new) normality

In this phase we will have managed to accept that the situation has changed and people are transitioning into a new normal. What the new normal is, was mainly outlined in phase 3. People, consumers, politicians, voters, etc. make up their mind, accept policies, have coped with the stress of the crisis and have established new routines and policies.

Communication tasks in this phase: Stay behind the topic despite people tending towards being done with the topic of the crisis.

The placement of big new messages and thereby reaching new target groups is much more difficult at this stage. This is the time to take a sensitive look around instead and assess the spots in which the sustainability seeds from phase 2&3 have landed on fertile ground. The task is now to take care of the seeds of sustainability that were sown on all levels: our communication should help people to assess what it is from their “old lives” that they want to take forward (intrinsic, non-monetary values, skills, relationships) and then help them to draw personal or policy mission statements and design strategies that define the way forward. Alternatives are still desirable and feasible (UBI, Green New Deal etc.) but by now, communicators should have collected solid arguments that show politicians the benefits of a designed transition instead of a sudden and uncontrolled one. Empiric analysis should be used to hold decision makers accountable to make the necessary fixes that the Corona Crisis uncovered in all the different sectors.

To make the most out of the new situation, communicators are advised to set clear goals and create action plans on how to sustain the positive legacy from phase 3.

After the crisis is before the crisis

Finally, with first steps out of lockdown, we will see both the initial silhouettes of a new normal, as well as people that may return to previous stages of coping. This might be the case when people feel faced with new change messages and new (societal) rules. If perceived as threats instead of opportunities some might jump back to stage 1 of the four stages of coping (e.g. think of the outcry of certain groups denying the need to wear masks in post-lockdown).

Kübler-Ross had already observed this phenomenon. She therefore underlined the non-linear character of the stage-model. People may find themselves going back and forth between phases or experience overlaps of the “classical” stages of coping mechanisms (see figure 1). Some might also fall into or get stuck in a depressed state (happens often in stage 3). Narratives and change management strategies should take this into consideration.

Finally, while the progression through the four stages is not always linear, structuring the coping process into stages such as the ones above, can provide helpful orientation for the well thought out and need-adjusted application of change narratives that support a sustainable way out of the Corona Crisis^[o3].

Accepting that the progression is not linear may also allow communicators to be empathetic towards the people they are communicating with, and to be understanding of why people react differently to different messages.

Post-Covid-19 communication tasks:

For researchers and investigative journalists, it will be essential to continue monitoring insights from the crisis, replicating narratives that have touched fertile ground and sharing lessons learned. They will have to remind people regularly of the systemic weaknesses that Corona had uncovered and reactivate groups of solidarity created in phase 2 in order to tap into common learnings. This will be the hardest – because a human tendency might be to revert back to the old “normal”. On a micro-level, this could mean falling back into old habits such as holding a meeting in-person instead of virtually, going on holiday far away, rather than more locally, or consuming and shopping at previous levels, etc. On a meso- and macro-level, polluting industries might be “rescued” while social equality and ecological measures suffer from claims of insufficient budget. We have to remind ourselves to not only talk, but also to “walk the talk”, and to hold our politicians accountable at the right moment in time to take action. If not for themselves, then for society to build resilience and overall “well-being”, and build back better.

[1] As of May 16th <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/countries-where-coronavirus-has-spread/>

[2] Erikson, K. (1996). A new species of trouble: Explorations in disaster, trauma, and community

[3] Picou, J. S., Gill, D. A., & Cohen, M. J. (1997). *The Exxon Valdez disaster: Readings on a modern social problem*. Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

[4] Kübler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. (2005). On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss. Simon and Schuster.

[5] Crompton, T. (2010). Common cause: The case for working with our cultural values.

[6] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/14/stay-alert-coronavirus-blame>

[7] Friedrich, E., & Wüstenhagen, R. (2017). Leading organizations through the stages of grief: The development of negative emotions over environmental change. *Business & Society*, 56(2), 186-213.