



44. Dealing with rumors

Last update: 2023-04-03

Overview

- Rumours are stories of uncertain truth. They often spread in communities during epidemics when people feel fear or anxiety about the disease. Rumours often provide an explanation for what is unknown about the disease, even if the explanation is not true.
- Rumours include *misinformation* or *disinformation*. Misinformation is when incorrect information is spread, without the intent to deceive, through a misunderstanding or a mistake. An example of misinformation is the rumour that Ebola is caused by witchcraft. In truth, Ebola is spread by a virus, but people often mistake it for witchcraft because they cannot see the virus or have never heard of the Ebola virus before.
- Disinformation is when incorrect information is spread intentionally to deceive or manipulate, such as “fake news”, which is disinformation disguised as news and is often spread for political or economic gain. An example of disinformation is when someone who sells multivitamins advertises that the tablets “cure” HIV, even though they know it is not true.

In epidemics, we often see two kinds of rumours:

- Rumours about possible cases
 - These rumours can violate community members’ privacy and right to confidentiality and may put them at risk
 - Rumours can often reflect pre-existing fears and prejudices within the community. This may lead to placing blame on different people or groups. This type of untrue belief can give community members “permission” to discriminate against someone or a group without feeling guilty, because of untrue beliefs.
 - They may also cause the unnecessary use/waste of health resources when rumoured cases must be followed up
- Rumours about the causes or treatment of the disease
 - Can distract from public health messaging
 - May conflict with the behaviours and practices recommended to fight the epidemic
 - Can create a dangerous situation for volunteers and healthcare providers if they cause mistrust

Paying attention to rumours can help us to understand the beliefs and perceptions that influence people. Using this information, we can make our messages specific to the community, the context and the beliefs. Rumours may also serve as a warning sign of hazards such as violence or risky behaviours so these can be managed quickly.

What to do and how to do it

Listen for rumours and capture information

- Establish a system for listening to rumours: Listening for rumours involves more than just hearing the words people use. To effectively listen to rumours, you need to:
 - Build trust with community members: Identifying rumours is not as simple as asking people about any rumours they have heard. This will not necessarily uncover rumours because people may believe a

rumour to be true and therefore not consider it a rumour. Also, people may not trust you as someone to discuss their beliefs with, in this way.

- Listen to the language the community is most comfortable using
- Tune into social and traditional media to understand what people are hearing and what they are saying
- Engage in open and unstructured conversations with diverse groups of people to understand the beliefs they hold and why they hold them
- Host group discussions with community members and members of community groups (such as women's or youth groups)
- Pay attention to what you hear during your work as a volunteer, but also during your personal time
- Establish a method of collecting information about rumours: Use a rumour log where you can record:
 - Details – what is the rumour?
 - Date - when was the rumour heard?
 - Location - where was the rumour heard?
 - Channel – how is the rumour being shared/spread?

Report and help to verify rumours

- Report rumours to your supervisor: Ask them to verify if the rumour is true or false
 - Sometimes parts of a rumour are true and other parts are false. It is important to understand the facts
 - Follow the guidance of your supervisor in uncovering more information about the rumour if possible
 - You may be asked to find out more information about the rumour from community members. You may also be asked to speak to the source of the rumour to understand more about what is being said and why
 - Explain that you are verifying a rumour, which may or may not be true, and repeat the rumour that you have heard
 - Ask them what is true/untrue about the rumour you heard and to state in simple terms the facts and how they know them
 - Repeat what you have heard, to check that you have understood them correctly. You should finish with a clear understanding of what they are describing – if you are not sure ask again
 - Try to find out what triggered the rumour. For example, did the rumour start because of a badly worded message? A government announcement? Etc.

Plan a response to rumours

- With your supervisor, develop a plan to address and prevent rumours. Do not ignore or deny rumours.
 - Rumours usually do not go away on their own and can cause big problems if they are not addressed
 - Replace rumours with accurate information
 - Respect local customs and beliefs and align messages with pre-existing beliefs and customs. For example, a common rumour might be that Ebola is caused by witchcraft; the conventional response is to refer to Ebola as a virus. However, rather than deny this pre-existing belief, it may be more useful to accept that this is what people believe and to create recommendations and messages that align such as: do not touch this person unprotected but feel free to provide food [and prayers] as a token of empathy
 - Use communication channels/people that community members trust
 - Use language that people understand and are comfortable with
 - Continue to engage in conversation with communities to make sure you are being understood