

Communicating Through a Pandemic

A Chronicle of Experiences,
Lessons Learned,
and a Vision for the Future

Amelia Burke-Garcia, PhD

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“When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit, the word ‘unprecedented’ was thrown around a lot—in part, as a way to wrap our heads around all the sudden disruptions to our lives. It was also a convenient and seemingly acceptable way for public health officials, school superintendents, employers, and city, state, and federal government officials to rationalize any missteps in their pandemic response and communication along the way.

And while the COVID-19 pandemic has been, in a way, unprecedented—in that as Americans, most of us haven’t been directly impacted to this extent by a public health emergency of this scale before—it’s far from the first time an infectious disease has disrupted entire societies. But instead of learning from challenges and successes of the past, the overwhelming sentiment among policymakers was that we had to start from scratch, and guess our way through the pandemic as it killed hundreds or thousands of people each day.

But thanks to the work of public health communication experts like Dr. Amelia Burke-Garcia, this won’t be the case when we’re staring down the next pandemic or public health emergency. In her book, *Communicating Through a Pandemic: A Chronicle of Experiences, Lessons Learned, and a Vision for the Future*, Burke-Garcia draws on her personal and professional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the messaging from previous pandemics, to create a tool for both understanding and engaging in meaningful and effective public health communication—particularly in emergency situations.

Burke-Garcia’s accessible writing style and format meets the reader where they are and includes definitions of words and phrases that, previous to COVID-19, were typically confined to a particular profession, but now have gone mainstream. She also clears up concepts crucial to communication, like ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation,’ that can be difficult to keep straight, even for seasoned professionals.

Although it would behoove public health officials and others tasked with public-health-related messaging to read the book in its entirety, Burke-Garcia structured it in a way that allows readers to use it as a reference, turning to the chapter they need when they need it, so the information is easy to locate and immediately digestible.

Another standout aspect of Burke-Garcia’s work is her inclusive approach to public health and the different types of communication it requires. This ranges from the impact of COVID-19 on our individual and collective mental health to a look at social determinants of health for different racial and ethnic communities, to highlighting the experiences of groups often left out of public discourse, including people experiencing housing insecurity, migrant and farm workers, and essential workers.

Communicating Through a Pandemic is an indispensable resource for those involved with public health decision-making and messaging, and an illuminating read for anyone looking to gain a deeper understanding of pandemic communication in general, or, more specifically, the reasoning behind and effects of the messaging we’ve received over the past two years.”

Elizabeth Yuko, PhD, bioethicist and Rolling Stone contributing editor

“Dr. Amelia Burke-Garcia’s book, *Communicating Through a Pandemic: A Chronicle of Experiences, Lessons Learned, and a Vision for the Future*, is one of the best health communication science books I’ve read in years. Her writing is vulnerable, at times, humorous, honest, and most importantly, educative. She shows us the intersection of COVID-19, emotional health, disparities, and inequality, and by creating *How Right Now!*, she reveals that there is hope, human kindness, and resilience amid a global pandemic. Dr. Burke-Garcia is a masterful storyteller, as she eloquently describes her COVID-19 experience, the dimensions of emergency response, and expertly guides the reader through creating *How Right Now!*, which embodies the spirit of Ubuntu: ‘I am because we are.’ Her book is the foundation we need for our village to be, and do, better in the future.”

Ashani Johnson-Turbes, PhD, *Vice President & Director of the Center on Equity Research, NORC at the University of Chicago and Vice President, Society for Health Communication*

“Dr. Amelia Burke-Garcia has written an indispensable guide to communicating for better public health—better health, period, of all Americans. Data show that telling and sharing our stories improves health outcomes. There’s no better medium than digital and social media for doing this—and Dr. Burke-Garcia gives us a guide.”

Morra Aaron-Mele, *Executive Vice President of Social Impact at Geben Communication, Founder of Women Online and The Mission List, Author of the book, Hiding in the Bathroom: An Introvert’s Roadmap to Getting Out There (When You’d Rather Stay Home), and host of the Anxious Achiever Podcast for LinkedIn Presents*

“With a mix of personal anecdote, compassionate reflection, and expert insight, Dr. Amelia Burke-Garcia demonstrates the crucial role context plays in public health messaging: What we’re going through can impact what information we see and how we perceive it ... This book should serve as a road map for pandemic communicators—what we’ve done and what we could do better.”

Robyn Correll Carlyle, MPH, *Public Health Consultant*

“*Communicating Through a Pandemic: A Chronicle of Experiences, Lessons Learned, and a Vision for the Future* by Dr. Amelia Burke-Garcia is a must read for communications professionals, not just in the public health field but in every field. As Dr. Burke-Garcia takes us through the history of pandemic communication, leading up to where we are today, it’s clear that not only her deep understanding of public health communication, but her big picture, nuanced perspective provides much-needed navigational guidance for where we go next. Thank you Dr. Burke-Garcia for providing this communication roadmap, filled with context and insight, for a crisis that certainly needs one.”

Cooper Munroe, *Founder and CEO, The Motherhood*

“As the pandemic pressed in on all of us, isolating us from the lives and the people that we had come to know and love, it began to take a toll in ways many of us could never have imagined. Not only were we wrestling to make sense of a strange new disease, the illnesses it was causing, and the deaths it left in its wake, but we also began witnessing mental health concerns with little understanding of what was happening.

In her book, Dr. Amelia Burke-Garcia walks us through that process and how it helped birth a mental health, coping, and resilience campaign called *How Right Now* (or *Que Hacer Ahora*, in Spanish). She shares insights and information on what she learned through her work with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and how we can learn from this pandemic so that when the next one rolls around, we can do better at not only disseminating information but helping people to cope.

Burke-Garcia’s personal and relatable style throughout the book provides an engaging and authentic look at her own experience as well as ties in what was happening in the world around us. She begins by building a foundation rich with science and data that not only helps the reader make sense of where the book is going but lends to its credibility. She also explores the media’s role, the impact of social media, and the mixed messages people have received throughout—all of which can have an impact on a person’s understanding of and response to the pandemic.

This book makes a wonderful resource for those who work in public health or even mental health, but it also is a useful read for anyone who has lived through COVID-19. Not only are the anecdotes relatable, but reading the experiences of others resonates with readers and lets them know they are not alone in their experiences—there are other people out there who are going through the same thing. This book also provides an insightful and thought-provoking history of what our country—as well as the world—experienced.

As Burke-Garcia reminds us, we can learn from this pandemic and get better at communicating true information during public health crises. We can learn how to utilize social media to support our messages rather than allow it to work against us and she willingly shares her ideas and experiences in an insightful and thought-provoking way. And, even though our world may be different than it was pre-pandemic, Burke-Garcia’s book reminds us that there is still hope.”

Sherri Gordon is an author and contributing writer for *VeryWellFamily*.

She is also a bullying prevention and healthy relationship advocate and writes regularly about parenting, mental health, and technology.



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Communicating Through a Pandemic

Outbreaks, epidemics, and pandemics are nothing new and over the course of the last several decades, we have been through numerous ones—Zika, Ebola, H1N1. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has challenged us like never before. During this time, we have struggled to work remotely, to balance work and children’s school schedules, and to manage finances in the face of lost or furloughed jobs. We have worried about our loved ones getting sick and being able to support themselves, and we have faced the loneliness that comes with social distancing.

It has affected us individually and globally—but we have not all experienced this pandemic in exactly the same way. Some communities have been hit harder in terms of sickness and death rates from COVID-19. Many have felt the economic pressures of the pandemic more acutely. Still others have struggled disproportionately with the mental health impacts. Context has mattered in this pandemic.

There is one common thread that runs through all we have experienced though: The role that communication has played in managing this pandemic. Whether we are talking about communication about the virus and mitigation strategies, communication between friends and family, the urgent crisis that is mis- and dis-information, our complex and diffuse media environment, or new workplace communication strategies, communication has been front and center in this pandemic.

The role of communication has been integral to the success *and* failure of our ability to respond and adapt to and begin to recover from this pandemic—as individuals, as communities, and as countries. As a result, issues such as preparedness, misinformation, literacy and comprehension of virus and vaccine science, health equity and mental health have all gained increased awareness during this time.

This book unpacks the many and varied roles that communication has played over the course of this pandemic in order to help public health professionals, marketers and health communicators, and policymakers alike understand what we have been through, what has worked well, and what we have struggled with—personally in our lives and collectively in our communities—in order to be able to address future pandemics more successfully. It can help us learn from this experience and get better at communicating through pandemics in the future.

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To Betsy, Jorge, Allison, Kathy, Cynthia, Pierce, Turquoise, and Craig.
And to all the public health professionals who have worked so hard
and given up so much over the course of this pandemic.

This book is for you.

Thank you.

In loving memory of Bear
January 28, 2010–October 21, 2021



Contents

Foreword	xiii
About the Author	xvii
Notes to the Reader	xix
1 Introduction—A.K.A. My Pandemic Story	1
2 A Brief History of Pandemic Communication	15
3 Dimensions of Crisis and Emergency Response Communication	41
4 Pandemic Communication in Our Current Media and Communication Environment	57
5 Phases of Messaging	69
6 Audience Group Experiences	85
7 Disparities Already Existed—The Pandemic Just Exacerbated Them	101
8 Introducing <i>How Right Now</i> and Other Pandemic Communication Efforts	115
9 Building a Team and a Communication Campaign in the Middle of a Global Pandemic	135
10 Conclusions, Lessons Learned, and a Vision for the Future	151
Notes	171
Index	191



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Foreword

The COVID-19 Pandemic has touched us all in one way or another, some of us more acutely, such as those who have experienced the loss of loved ones, isolation, depression, fear, or anxiety. For others it has led to disruptions to our livelihoods, persistent stressors, changes in lifestyles, uptake of technology and devices, or wide range of emotional challenges. Dr. Burke-Garcia captures these types of experiences in this book as she shares her story during the COVID-19 pandemic and her significant leadership role in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) campaign, *How Right Now/Qué Hacer Ahora*.

Storytelling is a powerful method of sharing personal and professional experiences unique to our lives, our work, our community, our society, and our globe. This phenomenological viewpoint shares real-life experiences to give a deeper sense of understanding about the impact pandemics have on mental health. What we know is that COVID-19 is not only an infectious disease, but a shared collective experience.

Dr. Burke-Garcia takes us through her personal journey during COVID-19 and walks us through initiation, development, and roll out of the *How Right Now/Qué Hacer Ahora* campaign. She gives us an important view of the public health challenges facing America today and the complicated pandemic communication environment. She is introspective, factual, hopeful, and grateful to share her story. Every word, sentence, paragraph, and chapter are devoted to informing and educating us about this pandemic and efforts to mitigate its spread. The story of COVID-19 is the ubiquitous story of those impacted and infected, those hospitalized, in recovery, uninfected by the virus, tragedies and traumas, the public health response to the pandemic, the accumulative losses and extended grieving, the mixed social messaging and informational challenges spread across the health communication environment. She carefully describes the persistent and evasive characteristics of the infectious disease and its effect on our mental health.

The campaign promulgated by CDC and supported by the CDC Foundation was researched and operationalized by NORC at the University

of Chicago. By any measure it was an early and quick response to inform the public with facts, describing risks, and encouraging self-efficacy and norms about mitigating the spread of the infectious disease. Much was learned by the team who were informed by research participants' stories of either being impacted or infected by COVID-19. The *How Right Now/Qué Hacer Ahora* team, made up of experts from across the country, worked together at an accelerated pace and in a virtual environment at the onset of COVID-19 in the spring 2020 through its formal launch in August 2020 as the number of COVID-19 cases was proliferating.

As you read about the campaign's informative research methods that helped craft messages in English and Spanish, it focuses on the mental health impact of COVID-19 on diverse groups who were, have been, and will continue to be adversely impacted by an infectious disease that has yet to meet its own demise. Genuine and culturally informed outreach and engagement was deployed by design and not as an afterthought. The longstanding advocate mantra "nothing about us without us" tapped into the cultural brokers from the diverse communities sought for the formative research.

Communities of color, such as Latinos, were disproportionately infected, hospitalized, dying, unemployed, unsheltered, hungry, and left in a maze of misinformation or uncertainty. The initial, arduous, and incremental roll out of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the challenge to expedite the development of the COVID-19 vaccines, combined by conflicting messages at the local, state, and federal levels all played a role in who people felt they could trust and what they believed was the right thing to do. Meanwhile, essential workers were and continue to be exposed at work and in educational settings, which has impacted America's workforce in all sectors. The campaign's important focus on the emotional well-being addressed the increasing and persistent stressors on our personal and collective mental health. Research participants openly expressed their heartfelt emotions in genuine and raw form. America as a nation is also experiencing collective emotional strain and pain caused by this pandemic. You will be touched by the personal testimonial vignettes found in this book. They remind us of our shared vulnerability, humanity, and resilience.

This book is not only a must-read but also a tool for all of us to use. As a retrospect of the last two years of the pandemic in the U.S., it captures the onset, twists and turns, valleys, and pinnacles of the pandemic. But most of all, it informs us of what we can do to help ourselves, our families, our neighborhoods, our friends, our community, our nation, and our fellow human beings. In part, I feel the public health imperative to encourage my colleagues, Latino cohorts, health care providers, community members, parents, educators, policy leaders, public health, and mental health leaders to learn and

participate in the *How Right Now/Qué Hacer Ahora* campaign. It helps us make sense of the factors that have consumed our lives the last two years and learn what more can be done together—How and Right Now!

Let's not forget those individuals continuing to fight this infection for the benefit of everyone and not just some. This story will inspire you to continue to combat our common enemy: COVID-19. Let's work together to extinguish this pandemic. Let's find new messages tailored to individuals and communities to build on the successes of this campaign and others to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Let's continue to reach out to the most vulnerable of our society so that we can bring more light to a dark chapter in our nation's public health and mental health story. They are not hard to reach, they live in our neighborhoods, communities, and among us.

Join me in thanking Dr. Burke-Garcia for sharing her story—a story of hope. The next phase of the campaign must now reach into the deepest crevices of our systemic and social structures so that we can build our collective resiliency to protect, promote, and preserve our well-being as a nation, now and in the future.

Fredrick Sandoval, MPA

Executive Director

National Latino Behavioral Health Association



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About the Author



Dr. Amelia Burke-Garcia is an award-winning health communication professional, author, and keynote speaker. With a background in health communication program planning, implementation, and evaluation, her career spans several decades. She currently acts as the Program Area Director, Digital Strategy and Outreach, at NORC at the University of Chicago, where she designs and implements strategies that leverage the power of digital media to influence behavior. She currently oversees the award-winning *How Right Now/Que Hacer Ahora* campaign, which aims to increase people's ability to cope and be resilient amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. She also currently leads several studies focused on exploring social media influencers and vaccine hesitancy. Over the course of her career, Dr. Burke-Garcia has spearheaded some of the most innovative communication programs and studies on a variety of health topics, including designing a targeted social media intervention with mommy bloggers to help social media users lower their risk for breast cancer, and leveraging MeetUp groups and the Waze mobile application to move people to action around flu vaccination and HIV testing, respectively. She is widely published and the author of the book, *Influencing Health: A Comprehensive Guide to Working with Social Media Influencers*, which came out in 2019. She has been highlighted by the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, for her work in honor of Women's History Month and has been named to VeryWellHealth.com's list of 10 Modern Female Innovators Shaking Up Health Care. She holds a PhD in Communication from George Mason University, a Master's degree in Communication, Culture, and Technology from Georgetown University, and a joint honours Bachelor's degree in International Development Studies and Humanistic Studies from McGill University.



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Notes to the Reader

Before we begin, I want to share a couple of things with you related to the scope of this book.

First, this book was written over the course of the pandemic and as such, it has been written in a tense that reflects that time period. Therefore, despite President Biden declaring the COVID-19 pandemic over on September 18, 2022, this book is written from the perspective of still being in the pandemic.

As well, I want to note that I mostly use the term, “COVID,” throughout this book (rather than specifically, “COVID-19”). This is intentional as I refer to COVID both as a virus and pandemic as well as a time period and set of experiences we have all gone through.

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge a few colleagues who contributed in various ways to this book. First, Bryan Gustafson helped me with reviewing articles for Chapter 5. Second, two of my *How Right Now* team members, Ms. Lily McCutchan (who previously worked with me at NORC at the University of Chicago) and Ms. Carol Schadelbauer (who works for Burness Communications) helped me in thinking through the qualities of our team for Chapter 9. And Erin Cutroneo helped with the design of Figure 5.1.

Finally, I want to note that throughout this book, we will cover numerous difficult topics including discussions of death, depression, suicide and suicidal ideation, trauma, racism, and hate crimes. I want you to be prepared for the discussions of these topics in the pages that follow and to know that if you are not comfortable with them, it is ok to skip sections and read this book so that it is fitting and useful for you.

And if you are experiencing a crisis right now, you can find help at the resources below:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233

xx ■ *Notes to the Reader*

- National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) (para español presiona el 2)
- National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-4AChild (1-800-422-4453)
- The Trevor Project's Lifeline: 1-866-488-7386
- Veteran's Crisis Line: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Thank you.

Chapter 1

Introduction—A.K.A. My Pandemic Story

*The secret of change is to focus all of your energy,
not on fighting the old, but on building the new.*

—Socrates

I started writing this book as a way to process what I have been through over the course of this pandemic. As a way to understand the magnitude of what we all have been through during this time. However, it has been hard to figure out how to really articulate what the past several years have been like.

On the one hand, I have been in the same boat as many of you. Stuck at home, socially isolated from many of the people and things I love, worried about getting sick or someone I love getting sick, worried about new variants, watching many people (including some I have known) die from COVID, feeling frustrated by people refusing the vaccine in the face of so much death, feeling hopeless at times when it felt like this situation would drag on forever; all-the-while trying to figure out how to keep living my life during a pandemic.

You know. All those things that we all have gone through. Those feelings and experiences that have been universal.

On the other hand, my experiences have also not been like the experiences of others. Generally, I have managed through it all OK. I have been lucky not to have had to struggle *that much* during this pandemic. I am fortunate to have a job that I can do from my home. I am fortunate enough to have a home and can