

Adjustment Reactions

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When someone first learns about a new and potentially serious risk, the natural, healthy, and useful reaction is, in a limited sense, an “over-reaction”:

1. *You pause.* You stop (or try to stop) doing things that suddenly look like they might be dangerous (eating hamburgers, spending time in tall buildings) while you wait to see what’s going to happen.
2. *You become hyper-vigilant.* You watch CNN for hours. You check Google News periodically. You may even scrutinize suspicious-looking people in nearby cars, restaurant booths, and airplane seats.
3. *You personalize the risk.* You imagine what it would be like if a risk that is already hurting others, and may be coming your way, were actually here now.
4. *You take extra precautions* – precautions that are probably unnecessary, at least so far. You go out for Mexican food instead of Chinese food (SARS) or Chinese food instead of Mexican food (hepatitis).

These responses are what psychiatrists call an adjustment reaction. Characteristics of the adjustment reaction:

1. *It comes early in the crisis.* This may be the start of a crisis that hasn’t yet gotten here or gotten big. Or it may be a precursor event, a potential crisis that doesn’t turn into an actual crisis this time.

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2. *It is temporary.* The adjustment reaction is a short-term phenomenon that eases the transition to the New Normal. Very few people get stuck in a long-term overreaction (those that do get stuck may need professional help). Most people “overreact” briefly.
3. *It serves as a rehearsal.* The adjustment reaction is an emotional rehearsal, getting you psychologically ready to cope if you have to. And it is a logistical rehearsal, getting you ready logistically as well.
4. *It is a “small” over-reaction.* The adjustment reaction is excessive only because it is technically premature. If and when the actual crisis arrives, this level of reaction and more may well become entirely appropriate.
5. *It reduces the damage done by later events.* People who have gone through a successful adjustment reaction are less likely to over-react to an actual crisis that follows, and they tend to recover from it faster. They also recover more quickly from a crisis threat that does not materialize.

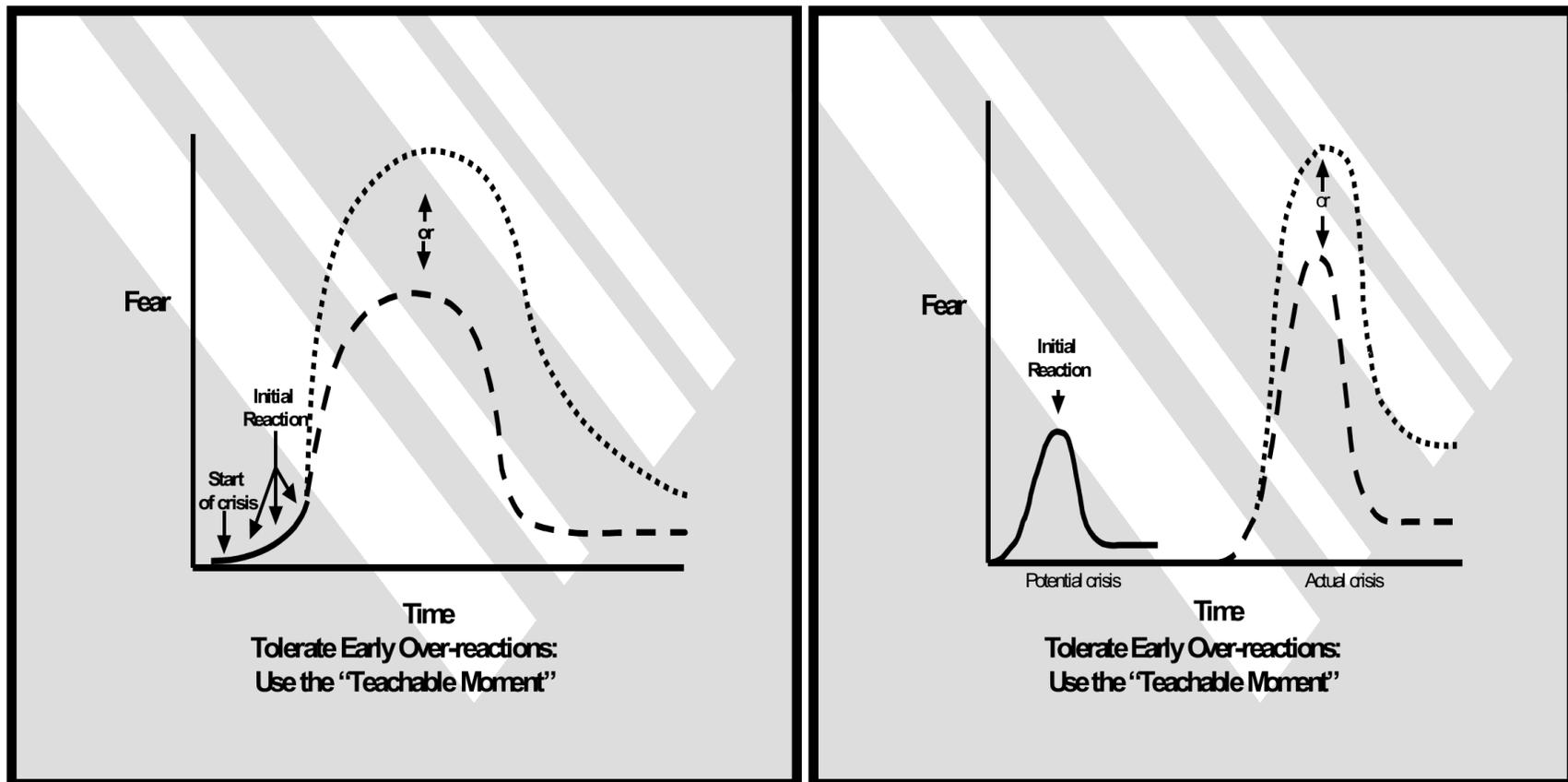
This is the teachable moment. Instead of criticizing or ridiculing the public’s adjustment reactions, officials should legitimize and guide them.

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