

PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC HEALTH MESSAGING

Initial concepts

UK Public Health Network
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The UK Public Health Network is partly supported by The Health Foundation, an independent charity committed to bringing about better health and healthcare for people in the UK.

FrameWorks Institute & The Health Foundation challenge us to:

1. Broaden what is understood by the term 'health'
2. Increase understanding of the role of social determinants of health
3. Increase understanding of how social and economic inequalities drive health inequalities
4. Generate an understanding of the policy action needed to keep people healthy

FrameWorks Institute's suggested "rules":

- **Never repeat a negative frame:** re-state the question to set up a different frame or dismiss the old frame and replace with the new one.
- **Frame the data, don't use numbers in place of narrative:** translate numbers into a more powerful story.
- **Use metaphors to bridge:** part of your strategy to move from a negative frame to a positive one.
- **Contextualise:** human interest stories may help with engaging, but more is needed to lead to policy change; you must bridge to the bigger picture.

Language that may help

- **Causal chain:** for example, low educational attainment leads to poor employment leads to poor quality housing leads to low educational attainment.
- **Opportunity for improvement:** particularly when speaking about regulation, but explanations around regulation must be truthful.
- **Wellbeing:** explicit use of language that is more meaningful to the public such as wellbeing instead of health, schooling or attainment instead of education.
- **Emergency:** arouse a response by using the language of an emergency that can be tackled rather than a crisis that may paralyse action
- **Solution-focussed:** demonstrate how integrated solutions can help address complex social issues.
- **Equality & fairness:** use fairness and equality as a basis for talking about wellbeing.

Language to avoid

- **Determinants:** social determinants and wider determinants of health may not mean much to the public. Refer to factors that create, support and maintain wellbeing instead. Avoid “wicked issue” - it may be counterproductive and make the problem seem too hard to solve.
- **Individual responsibility:** avoid gesturing, even as an attempt at meeting people halfway. It will only help maintain an unhelpful focus on individual lifestyle factors.
- **Crisis:** crisis language reinforces fatalistic attitudes. Use the language of an emergency, which can galvanise action and be a more effective call to action.
- **Health inequalities:** the public will think ‘medical’ rather than ‘social’ and governments will be excused from addressing issues of income, housing, education etc.

Tone

Adopt a reasoned approach that enables people to process information and think about a problem and its solutions.

Avoid rhetoric that others might regard as political, ideological or partisan in nature.

Narrative: deliver a story to interpret the evidence, what it means to neglect the problem and provide tangible examples of actions that can be implemented.

Values: pick up on the public's values in order to attract policy-makers' attention. Demonstrate understanding of what and how different sectors of the public think about the factors that create wellbeing.

Key references

- *Framing public issues* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, 2002
- L'Hote E, Fond M, Volmert A . *Seeing upstream: mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of health in the United Kingdom* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute, 2018
- Elwell-Sutton T, Marshall L, Bibby J, Volmert A . *Briefing: reframing the conversation on the social determinants of health*. London: The Health Foundation, 2019