



County Health
Rankings & Roadmaps

Webinar

How public health can navigate communications challenges

December 9, 2025

countyhealthrankings.org



University of Wisconsin
Population Health Institute
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Support
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Guidelines

1
Share
successes and
lessons learned

2
Offer
resources

3
Build
knowledge

4
Listen
for multiple
perspectives



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Disclosures

- Views do not represent the University of Wisconsin Madison or the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
- Expertise of a CHR&R team of 35+ members is reflected and highly valued.
- Funding support from RWJF is appreciated.



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We value



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Collaboration

Innovation

Integrity

Courage

Inclusion

Excellence



Join the conversation

Question and Answer

Welcome to Q&A
Questions you ask will show up here. Only host and panelists will be able to see all questions.

Where can I find strategies to address children in poverty?

☐ Send anonymously

Who can see your questions?

Webinar Chat

Me to Everyone

JL Hi Everyone, I'm James, from Madison, WI.

Zoomhost CHRR to Everyone

Hello James and welcome to today's webinar.

Who can see your messages?

To: Everyone

Your text can be seen by panelists and other attendees



Group agreements

1. Listen actively
2. Participate fully
3. Speak from your experience
4. Lead with curiosity
5. Be conscious of body language
6. Expect ambiguity
7. Be accountable



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The Power of Language in Public Health

- Words influence trust, action, and solutions
- Language reinforces written and unwritten rules
- Language guides our understanding of health –
as individual or structural



Photo by [Hermes Rivera](#) on [Unsplash](#)



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Navigating Language Challenges in Public Health

- Language reflects power and values
- Pressure to reframe or avoid certain terms in public health
- Evidence-based communication builds understanding and equity



Photo by [Rodeo Project Management Software](#) on [Unsplash](#)



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Welcome



Julie Sweetland
Senior advisor
FrameWorks Institute



Jeff Niederdeppe
Liberty Hyde Bailey Professor of Communication
Cornell University



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Discussion group

When: Following the webinar

What: Share ideas, ask questions

How: Zoom

Why: Deepen learning



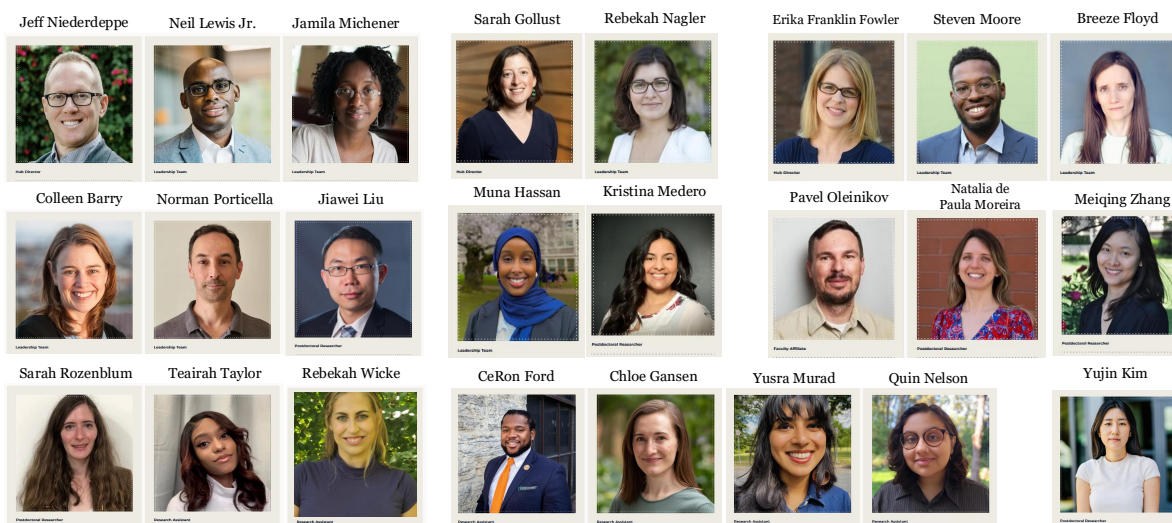


<http://commhsp.org>

The collaborative is made possible by generous support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
The views expressed by the collaborative do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.



Our Team



Our Approach

Responsive to a Dynamic Information, Evidence, and Policy Environment



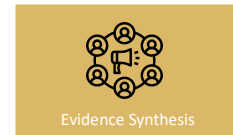
Takeaways on What We've Learned Relevant to the Current Moment

1. Messaging about racial inequality is not inherently divisive, if done thoughtfully
 - Child tax credit expansion
 - Protecting Medicaid
 - Evidence-based opioid addiction treatment
 - Policies to design healthier neighborhoods
 - Structural racism causing racial disparities
 - Climate change mitigation policies
 - Unequal impacts of climate change on health



Takeaways on What We've Learned Relevant to the Current Moment

2. Messaging can persuade and mobilize racially and politically diverse groups if it:
 - Identifies and centers shared values
 - Describes universal benefits (+ targeted ones)
 - Offers evidence about effective policy solutions
 - Explains how systems and structures shape health
 - Uses effective storytelling for social change
3. Centering audiences from historically excluded populations yields novel insights



Learn more at
<http://commhsp.org>

To subscribe to our newsletter:



Evidence-Based Guidance for Storytelling for Social Policy Change

1. **Screen (or pre-test) stories** with a small subset of the target audience to make sure incidental details don't convey unintentional messages;
2. **Acknowledge a role for individual behavioral choices** while emphasizing social, economic, and environmental barriers to those choices
3. **Scale up**: Choose characters and situations that reflect broader trends and convey, via words/images, that **other people share similar experiences**
4. **Show** (in the story) how an evidence-based policy solution will **help both the character and relevant populations at large.**

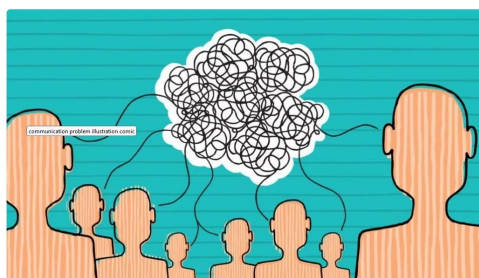
Source: <https://iaphs.org/using-stories-advance-population-health-science-tell-us/>

 COLLABORATIVE ON
MEDIA & MESSAGING
For Health and Social Policy



Evidence Synthesis

Other Work on Storytelling for Social Change



Using Stories to Advance Population Health: What Does the Science Tell Us?

<https://iaphs.org/using-stories-advance-population-health-science-tell-us/>

Storytelling for Social Change

A Message Brief
Liana B. Winett, DrPH & Jeff Niederdeppe, PhD
Oregon Health & Science University - Portland State University
School of Public Health Department of Communication

Stories can be powerful in shaping how audiences think about social issues, and the role of public policy in affecting them. Stories can make complex and abstract problems visible in our mind's eye. They help audiences imagine how we "got here" on an issue, and to envision the range of solutions we have before us as individuals, as

Contents

- The Power of Narrative
- What's in a Story?
- Starting Point: Planning Your Strategy
- Building a Story
- Telling the Story of Early Childhood

<https://www.evidenceforaction.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Messaging-Brief-Jan22.pdf>

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Evidence Synthesis

What is framing, and why does it matter right now?

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org

Our partners consciously reframe their issues

- By moving **from a vulnerability frame to a brain development frame**, the early childhood movement has reoriented funding, expanded programs, and improved outcomes
- By moving **from a risk communication approach to a mindset shift approach**, the American Academy of Pediatrics is reclaiming the conversation on childhood immunization
- By **focusing less on “proving” health inequities and more on illustrating causes and solutions**, the Rush Institute for Health Equity is increasing visibility, funding, and impact
- By **shifting emphasis from “preventable problem” to “unjust conditions,”** the tobacco control movement is moving next-generation protections that tackle health disparities

framing =

choices in how
we present ideas



differences in how
people respond

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Opinions and understandings are influenced by framing

Selected findings from a FrameWorks 2018 wording experiment

“Family physicians should
screen adolescents for alcohol
and drug use.”



People rejected the idea because
they assumed screening involved
testing of biological samples

“Family physicians should
ask adolescents about alcohol
and drug use.”



People rejected the idea because
they assumed that the purpose
was “catch & punish”

“Family physicians should
have a conversation with
adolescents about alcohol and
drug use.”



People visualized brief verbal
interventions and supported the
idea

How can public health practitioners manage pressures to change language?

“Chilling effects” might look like...

Generalized Anxiety:

**Communicating seems
fraught and dangerous**

Paralysis of Analysis:

**Diagnosing and dissecting
the problem stalls
(or stops) action**

Spiral of Silence:

**People of good will decide
not to share opinions that
seem unpopular**

Can you think about politicized terms more strategically?

Is the idea helpful and productive?

- If you can, continue to use the term.
- If you can't use the term, find a close synonym.
- Either way: Always explain what it means in plain, nonpartisan language.
- Organize and strategize with allies.



Is the idea harmful or unproductive?

- Don't repeat the term.
- Talk about the intent of the harmful idea and its impact.
- Organize and strategize with allies.

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Can you choose your language more strategically?

"We want to ensure that everyone has a fair, full, and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible, which requires:

- Valuing every person and their health
- Improving social conditions that can harm people's health
- Working with different groups in specific, sensitive ways to address health issues that affect them."

"Every person and every community has innate dignity. Our choices as a society should honor this dignity and treat everyone with respect.

When we let barriers stand between entire communities and the resources people need to be healthy and well, it's a form of disrespect."

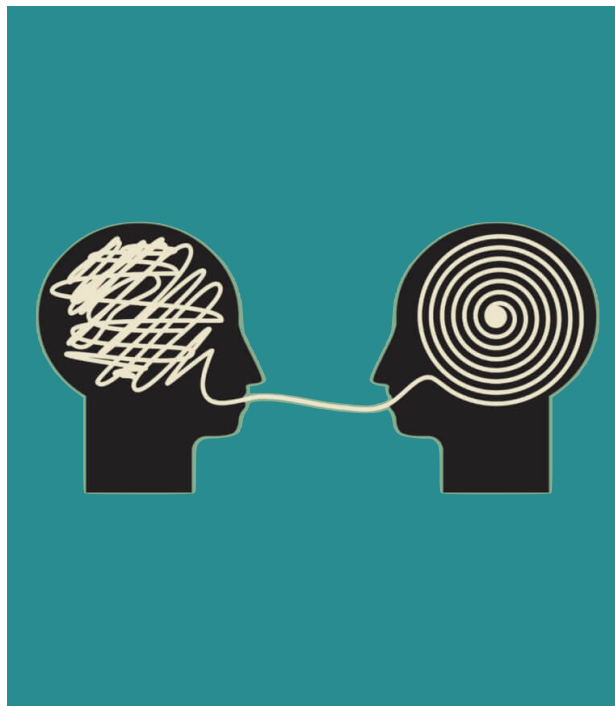
"As a society, we believe that everyone should have a fair shot. Our chances in life shouldn't be determined by our background or our zip code.

If we aren't stopping to make sure that our policies are fair, we're probably adopting policies that make things less fair."

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Can you make your ideas easier to understand?

- Use short, everyday words.
- Break up long sentences.
- Demonstrate connection, care, and concern.
- Invite audiences into your expertise with orienting background statements.
- Convert “terms of art” into “pictures of public health practices.”



We can use plainer language and storytelling style

Framed for other researchers

“The Pregnancy-Associated Mortality Review (PAMR) program was established to improve data collection and reporting of maternal deaths in Missouri.”



Reframed for the public

“When public health officials in Missouri noticed an increase in pregnancy-related deaths, they knew they had to take action.”

We can *translate* public health approaches

Framed with public health vocabulary

“Culturally and linguistically appropriate services (CLAS) is an important strategy for ensuring high-quality maternal health care and reducing racial and ethnic disparities in maternal mortality and morbidity.”



Reframed for partners & the public

“When communities offer programs that appeal to expecting mothers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, moms get the care they need in the way they need it. And we all get the benefit of healthier pregnancies, births, babies, and moms.”

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**How does FrameWorks’
research approach lead to
practical recommendations?**

descriptive research

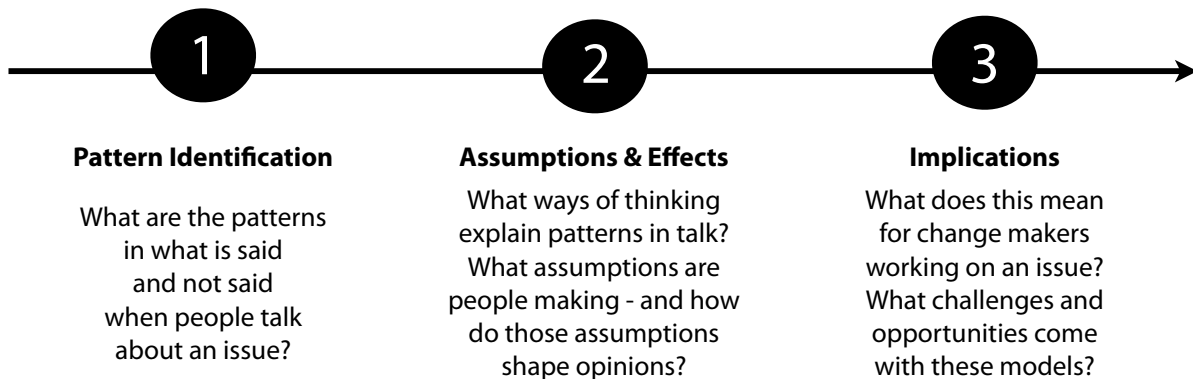
**how people
think now**

prescriptive research

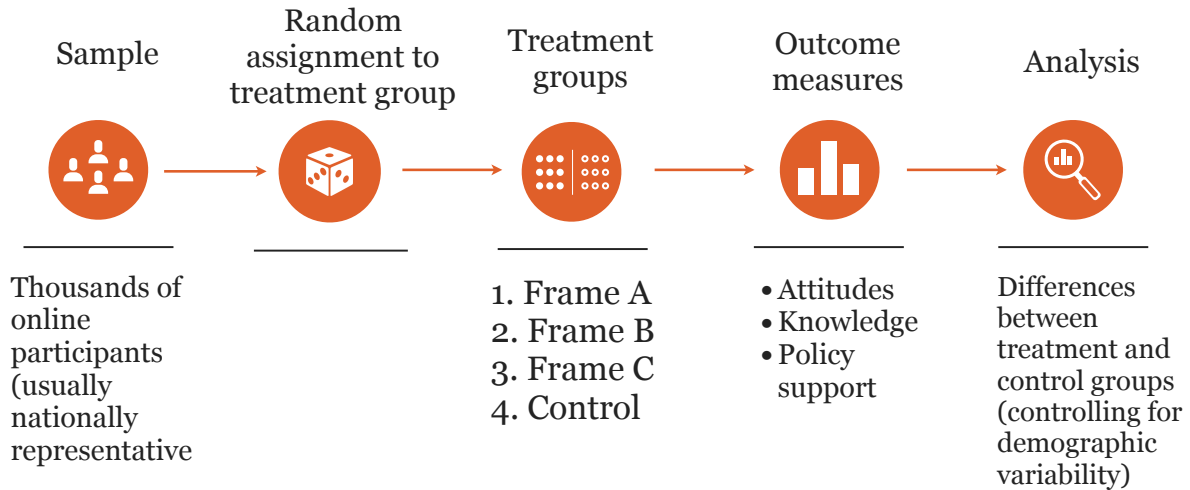
**how to spark
new thinking**

15

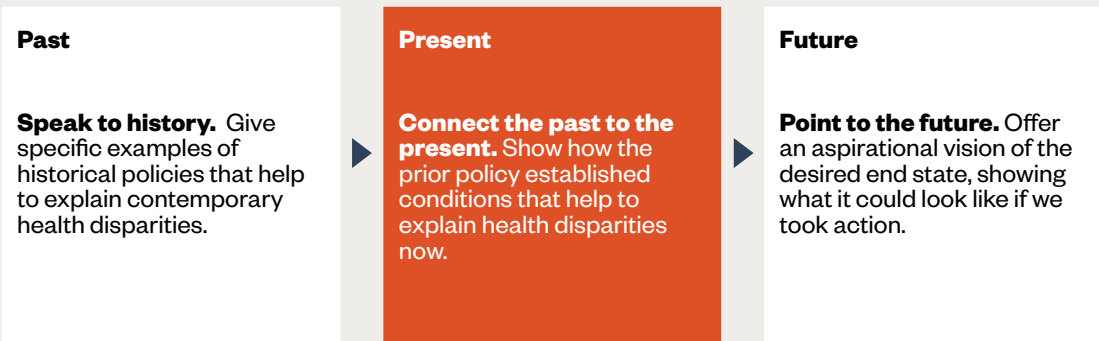
Cognitive analysis maps how people think -
and what it means for dialogue and outreach



A sound experimental design can identify frames that shift thinking

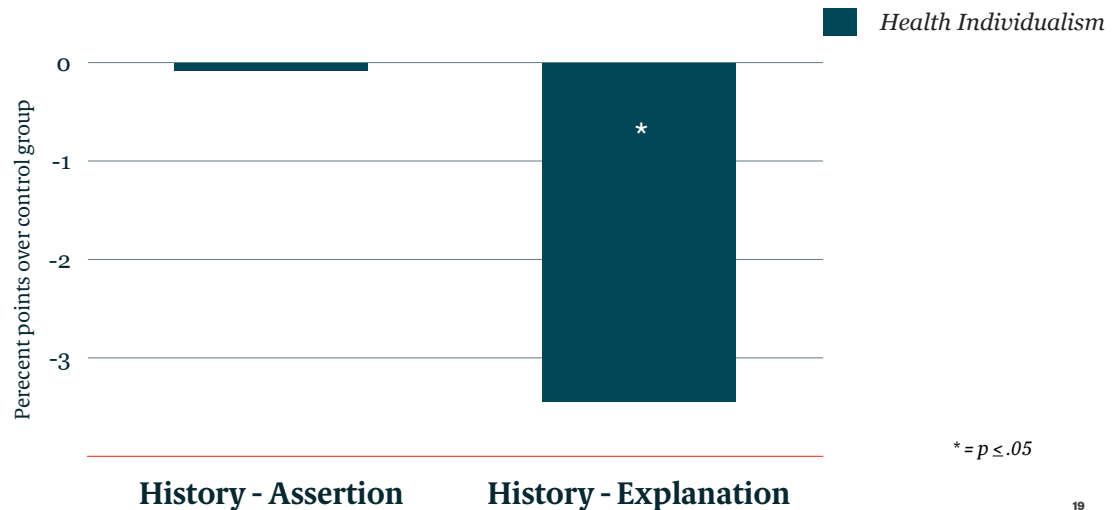


Frame health disparities in terms of past, present, future



Speaking to history reduced health individualism

*Selected results from a FrameWorks controlled survey experiment,
national sample with rural oversample, December 2023*



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Assertion

Today's housing patterns continue to reflect past discriminatory policies, such as redlining, and leave communities of color facing increased health risks and higher rates of health problems such as asthma, cancer, and cardiovascular disease. Communities of color face a disproportionate burden of environmental hazards and reduced access to quality food, transportation, health care, and educational and employment opportunities. This legacy of racism contributes to significant health disparities, with communities of color experiencing higher rates of chronic diseases and lower life expectancy compared to their white counterparts.

Explanation

In many US neighborhoods, most residents share the same race or ethnicity. Today's housing patterns reflect lines drawn on maps in the 1940s to keep people of color in certain areas - a discriminatory federal policy known as "redlining."

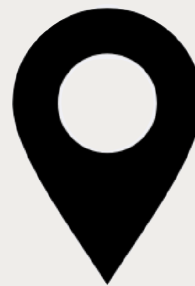
This history matters because neighborhoods play a major role in health. Because highways, factories, and incinerators were often placed in majority-Black communities, residents now face higher pollution and other toxins, affecting people's lungs, hearts, and overall health.

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When it comes to talking about health equity topics, what are framing pitfalls to avoid?



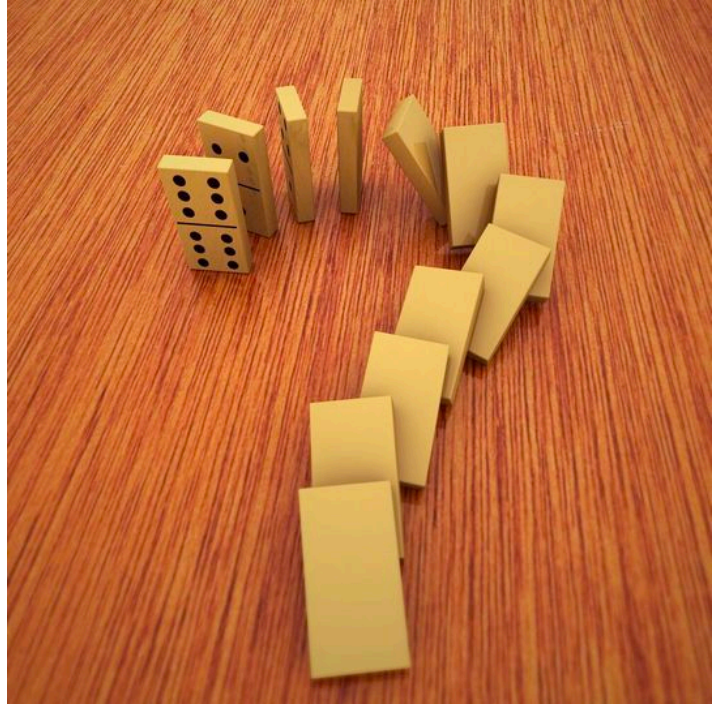
Individualism



Context Matters

Attribute responsibility carefully.

- Attribution means the way we explain the causes of behavior, events, or conditions
- Attribution of causes has a major effect on how people think about solutions



Attribution of responsibility

Instead of “behavioral attribution”

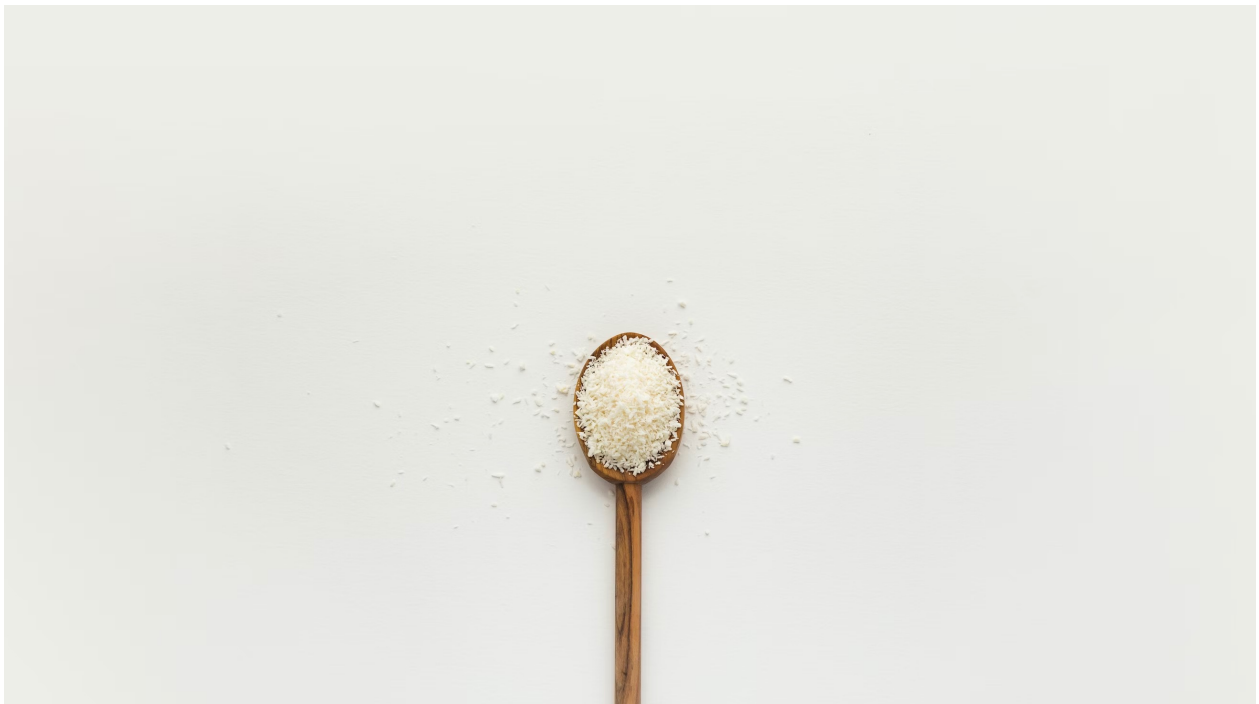
“Every year, roughly 3,600 babies in the US die suddenly for unknown reasons. Researchers estimate that if expectant moms would just quit smoking, we could prevent 800 of those deaths.”



Try “access attribution”

“Researchers estimate that if we connected expecting families to treatment for nicotine dependency, we could prevent 800 infant deaths a year.”

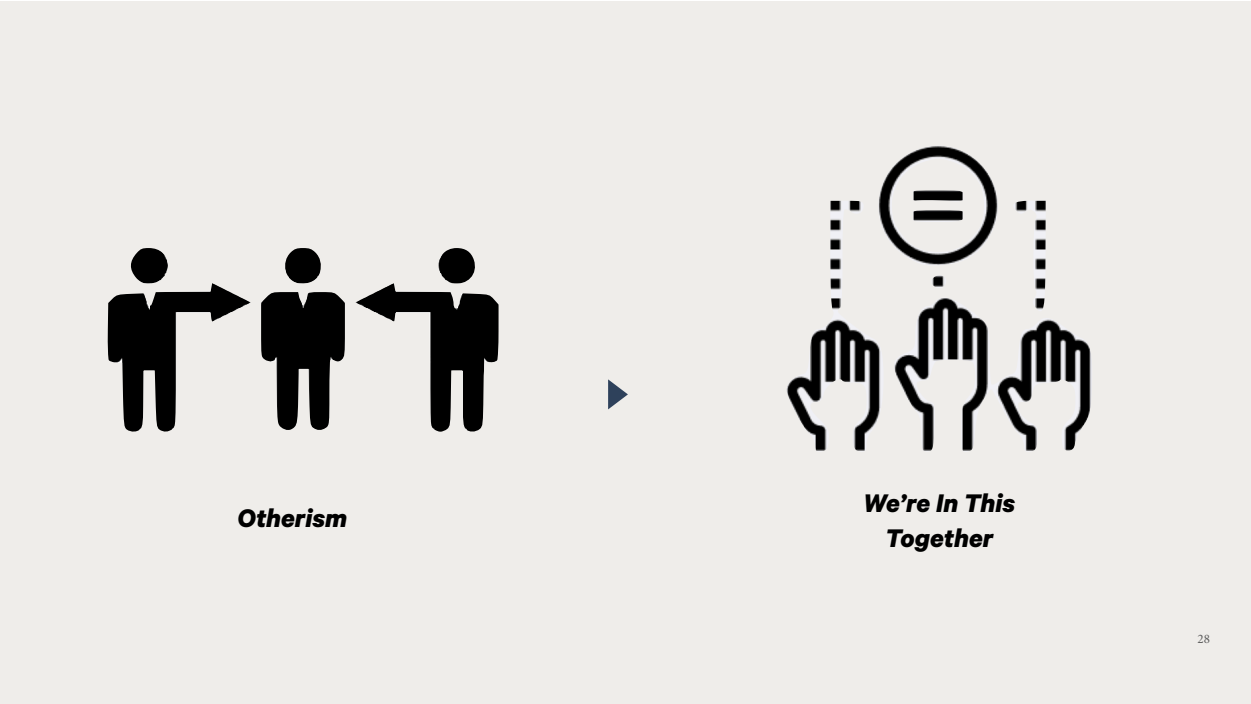
“Every day, there are nearly 10 accidental drownings in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). That’s 3,500 people every year who die in water. Within these numbers is a startling fact: the fatal-drowning rate of Black/African-American children is three times higher than white children. Why? According to a recent national study, 64 percent of Black/African-American children cannot swim. In comparison, only 40 percent of White children cannot swim.”



Show and tell the actions communities can take



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Use a broad, generous “we”

framed with “othering” language

Efforts to prevent isolation among the elderly population are critical.



reframed with “togethering” language

We need ways to stay connected to our communities as we age.

Transition-age foster youth require supports beyond their 18th birthday.



We all need support in times of transition. Our young people in foster care are no exception.

Black women are up to three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related health complications than white women, even when controlling for socioeconomic status.



Every expecting mother should receive safe, respectful maternity care. We need to change the fact that Black women can't count on this essential care.

How have you seen reframing shift understandings or reduce resistance?

Americans are deeply dissatisfied with the state of our country—but aren't sure what change should look like.



We can — and must — help people see that a better future is within reach.



Putting it all together

In many US neighborhoods, most residents share the same race or ethnicity. Today's housing patterns reflect lines drawn on maps in the 1940s to keep people of color in certain areas - a discriminatory federal policy known as "redlining."

- Explanation of the historical policy that caused harm

This history matters because neighborhoods play a major role in health. Because highways, factories, and incinerators were often placed in majority-Black communities, residents now face higher pollution and other toxins, affecting people's lungs, hearts, and overall health.

- Explanation of how the past affects the present

We have an opportunity to make the future brighter than our past. For instance, many formerly redlined communities are being revitalized through initiatives that draw on the knowledge of longtime residents. These work best when they include protections for lower-income residents, so they aren't priced out of their neighborhood as it improves. With approaches that look forward without ignoring our past, we can create vibrant, thoughtfully designed neighborhoods that allow people, families, and communities to flourish.

- Example of contemporary corrective action

- "End state" framing to show a possible future

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A positive vision has strong frame effects

- Talking about the "end state" — what society would look like if we made changes — had **strong effects with rural participants** in FrameWorks' inquiries
 - In peer discourse sessions (small group discussions), ***us-vs-them* talk dissipated** when the topic turned to the aspirational end-state
 - In a controlled survey experiment, end-state aspirational frames built a sense that we could improve racial inequities and disparities
 - (Significantly increased collective efficacy on racial disparities by 10% over the control)

Got examples?



*Each and every person has inherent dignity and worth.
Every policy, practices, and program should treat
people and communities with dignity and respect.*

An example of reframing with dignity



Aspirational “end state” framing

“We’re working toward a Cincinnati where everyone can live in a thoughtfully-designed, thriving neighborhood —not just the lucky or affluent few. Together, we can turn the shortage of good places to live into an opportunity to create more vibrant, healthful neighborhoods. And we can build a future where all of the communities in our region are treated with dignity and have the resources needed for good health and overall wellbeing.”



What can public health communicators do now?

We can think about audiences more strategically

Reject your view

Anticipate their arguments

Frame for THEIR audiences

Are open to conversation

Explain, don't 'persuade'

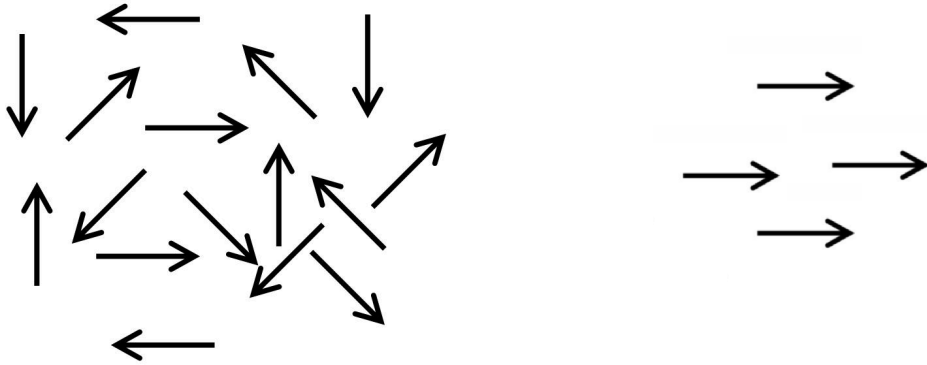
Activate

Support your view

Reinforce

Equip them as fellow framers

We can find ways to concentrate, not dilute, your power?



Our enemy is apathy, cynicism, and fatalism; the pernicious, authoritarian-friendly belief that we are merely victims of world events rather than active participants in a global struggle for freedom and justice. Every time one of us—a family member, a community organizer, a representative, a senator—takes a step forward in this fight, a thousand pairs of eyes watch and learn. Courage is contagious.

Ezra Levin and Leah Greenberg, founders of Indivisible



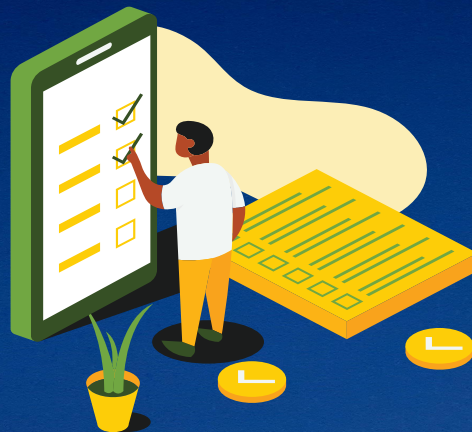
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Questions?



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Click on survey in the chat





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Upcoming webinar:

January 20, 2026

National Day of Racial Healing: The Role of Immigration Policy in Shaping Health Outcomes



Elizabeth Aranda
Im/migrant Well-Being Research
Center



Ivy Suriyopas
Grantmakers Concerned with
Immigrants and Refugees



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Discussion group

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Webinar

Thank You!

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