

How to Communicate to Build Understanding of Public Health



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Communicating about Public Health

A Toolkit for Public Health
Professionals

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About Us

The de Beaumont Foundation creates and invests in bold solutions that improve the health of communities across the country.

Our vision is a nation where every person in every community has the opportunity to achieve their best possible health, regardless of where they live.

Inciting action.
Driving change.

What to Expect

- Public health communications: The challenge
- Communications toolkit: The response
- Five big ideas: Tested messages + examples
- Strategy in action: Using the tested messages

All public health professionals are communicators – but communicating to build public health literacy hasn't been a priority

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As public health professionals, you can build understanding of public health in your community.

And understanding is a key building block of trust.

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We developed a research-based message strategy to build community members' understanding of public health and its value.

We set out to answer these questions:

- What do people already know about public health?
- What messaging will be most effective in building public health literacy?

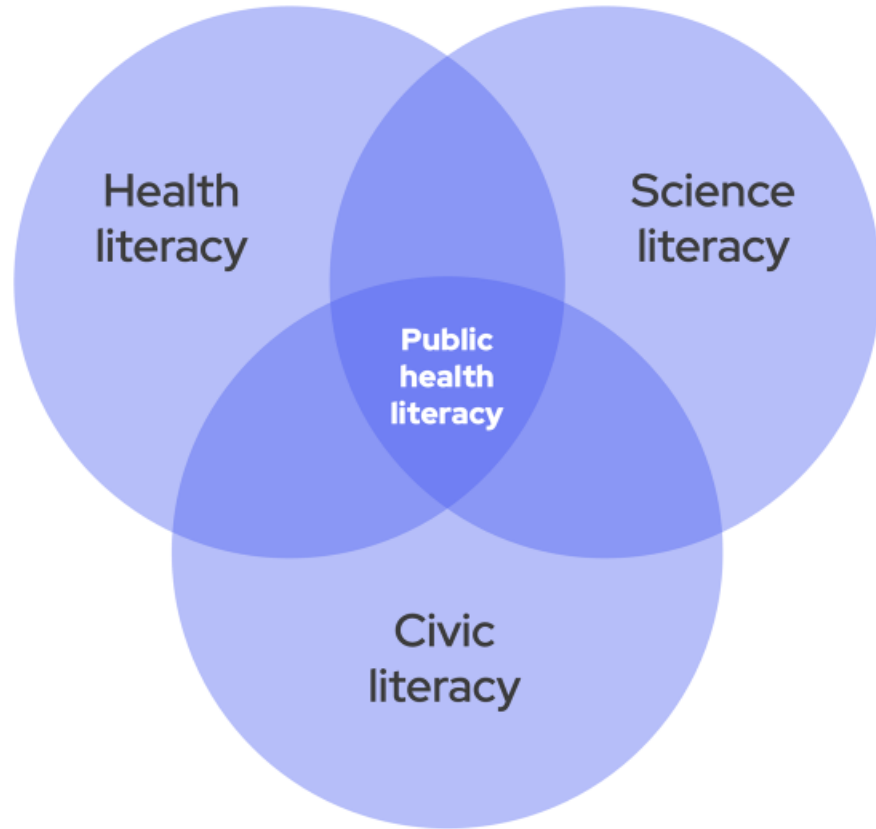
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Communicating About Public Health

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What is public health literacy?



An understanding of:

- What public health is
- What public health workers do
- How public health activities benefit individuals and communities



**Do you struggle with
communicating the value of public
health?**

Research, iteration, and toolkit development



Key Takeaways

Five knowledge gaps and ways to address them



Build your community's understanding of public health

Step 1

Connect the dots

What health topics or questions are likely to come up in your community?
Do they pose an opportunity to educate people about public health?

Step 2

Start with a talking point

- Public health works at the community level.
- Public health focuses on prevention.
- Public health workers serve their local communities.
- Public health workers play a variety of professional roles.
- Public health benefits everyone.

Step 3

Add examples

How can you illustrate this talking point using examples that align with your community's needs and interests?

Source: de Beaumont Foundation (2024). Communicating About Public Health: A Toolkit for Public Health Professionals.

Big idea: Public health works at the community level

Talking points and examples

“While doctors and nurses care for individual patients, most public health workers care for the health of entire communities.”



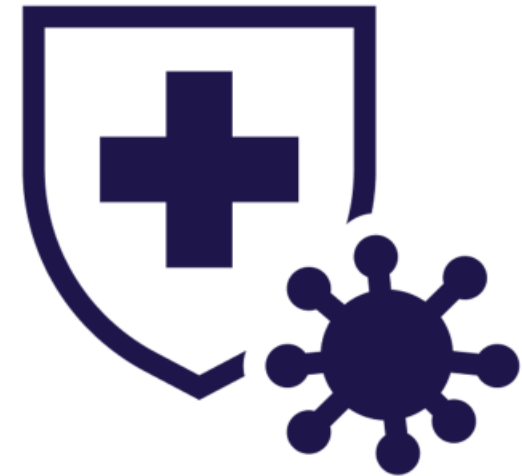
For example:

- Researchers track how infectious diseases like measles spread from person to person
- Inspectors check public pools to make sure water is safe to swim in
- Health educators teach people how to manage conditions like diabetes

Big idea: Public health focuses on prevention

Talking points and examples

“Because of public health, many serious diseases that were common in your parents’ or grandparents’ generations are now very rare in the United States. Public health workers take action to protect people from getting sick or hurt...”



...by doing things like:

- Looking for patterns in community data for signs of health threats
- Vaccinating people against diseases that spread from person to person
- Educating people about ways to stay healthy, like eating a variety of nutritious foods

Big idea: Public health workers are local

Talking points and examples

“Public health doesn’t do just one thing – instead, public health workers take many different actions in their communities to help protect people’s health.”



For example, they:

- Inspect local restaurants to make sure food is prepared safely
- Provide cancer screenings to community members
- Help community members stay safe during extreme weather

Big idea: Public health workers play many roles

Talking points and examples

“You may not always notice them, but public health workers include many people with different skills all working together to protect the community’s health.”



Say there’s a food-borne illness outbreak in your community.

- Researchers may conduct studies and look for patterns in the data to find out what foods are making people sick.
- Based on the researchers’ findings, local health departments may post on social media and alert local news stations to let community members know what foods to avoid.
- Community health workers may test people for the illness and help them get treatment.
- Restaurant inspectors may work to prevent future foodborne illnesses.

Big idea: Public health benefits everyone

Talking points and examples

“Public health is based on the idea that everyone should have an equal chance to be as healthy and safe as possible. Public health workers aim to help every member of a community...”



...by doing things like:

- Educating residents on health and safety recommendations so they can make informed choices to protect their health
- Testing the local water supply to make sure people have clean water to drink
- Providing affordable hearing or vision tests to anyone who needs them

Which of the five big ideas or gaps of understanding do you feel most prominently in your own work?



- a. Public health works at the community level (population vs. Individual focus)
- b. Public health focuses on prevention
- c. Public health workers are local
- d. Public health workers play many roles
- e. Public health benefits everyone

Strategies in Action

Finding and creating opportunities in the context of your community

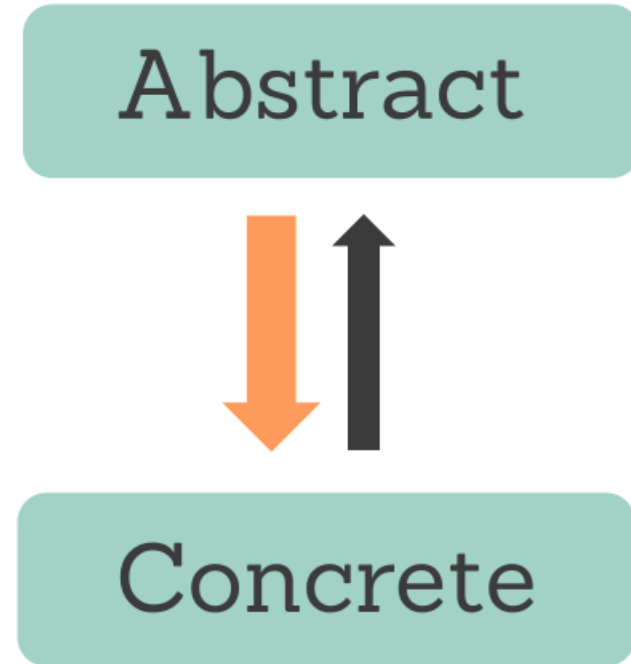


Strategy: Use examples

- People prefer content with details about public health activities.
- The examples are often the most memorable part.

Try this:

- Provide clear examples of public health activities to make abstract ideas more concrete.

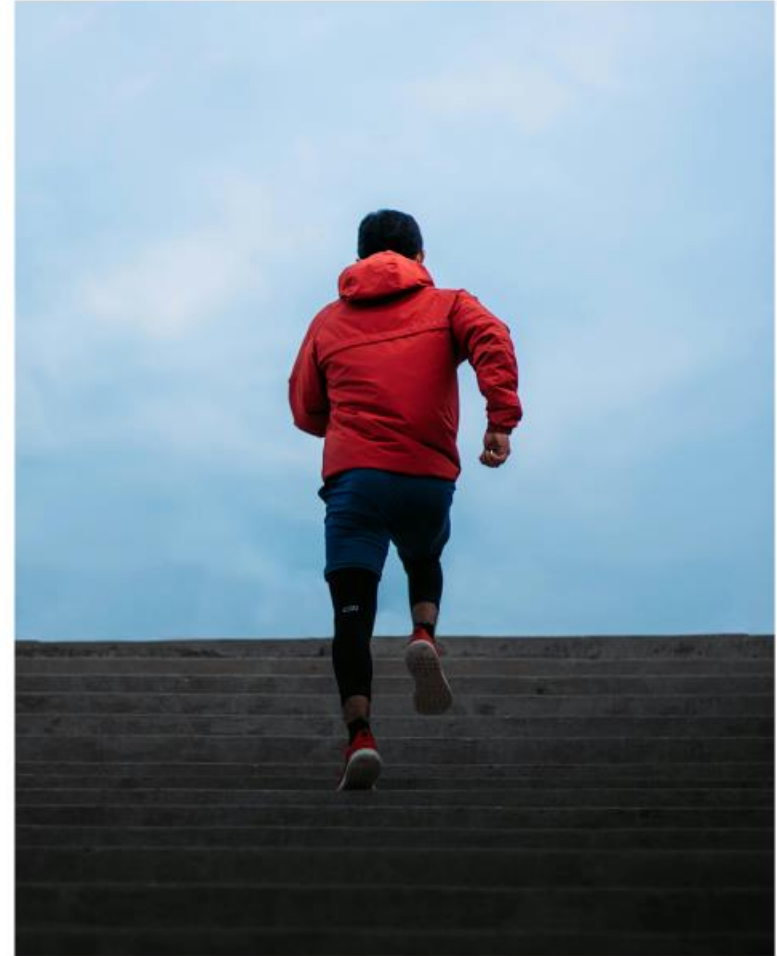


Strategy: Keep messaging grounded

- Long-term, abstract public health goals may seem unrealistic, out of reach, or untrue to experiences.

Try this:

- Use level-setting language, like “public health workers aim to...”
- Explain the tangible actions public health workers take, emphasizing that small steps add up to bigger impacts.



Strategy: Find and create opportunities

- Public health is a broad and complicated concept that's hard to grasp instantly.

Try this:

- Proactively incorporate talking points into conversations about specific health topics.



Strategy: Highlight opt-in services

- Some people think of public health guidelines as rules limiting their personal choices.

Try this:

- Highlight services that people can choose to engage with on their own terms.



Strategy: Consider systemic issues

Keep in mind:

- Systemic injustices may affect how people view public health organizations and current events.
 - People of color, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities may have experienced discrimination and mistreatment from health professionals.
 - Health experts have shared harmful messages about particular groups.

Try this:

- Consider how systemic injustices impact communities you serve.
- Use this context to identify examples that may bring up strong emotions.
- Approach conversations with care.

Remember:
Trust is at the
intersection of
competence and
compassion.

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