

Communicating with H.E.A.R.T. in Public Health



Practical Considerations to Center Empathy and Compassion in Public Health Communications

H Humility
Honesty

E Engagement
Equity

A Accessibility
Authenticity

R Resonance
Reach

T Transcreation
Transparency

Listening to Find Your Way to the H.E.A.R.T.

Empathy and compassion are important elements of public health communications. Empathetic communications show an awareness and consideration of your audiences' emotions, beliefs, and experiences. Compassionate communications act on awareness and consideration to support and inform audiences in a responsive way. To create empathetic and compassionate communications, be sure to listen to your audiences, and when you do, **listen to understand**. This can help the H.E.A.R.T. you bring to your communications be better informed and fully aware of the circumstances faced by your audiences. As you develop communications that center both empathy and compassion, consider some of these listening techniques:

- **Avoid formulating answers** in your mind while you are listening to a response.
- **Bring an open and curious mind** to your listening.
- **Consider biases** you may bring to your listening before a conversation starts or before you review responses.
- **Gain deeper insight** into the perspective of your audience instead of focusing on yours.
- **Use active listening** when you are in conversation with your audience. Summarize and repeat what you heard and ask clarifying, open-ended questions to ensure you understand.

Questions to Get to the H.E.A.R.T. of the Situation

In addition to using good listening techniques, pausing to ask yourself critical questions is another important way you can bring more H.E.A.R.T. to your communications as specific situations arise. Use these questions to help you prepare communications that show respect and consideration for your audience as you confront specific situations:

1. **Have we listened to understand?** Is there any time to gather input or perspective from the community impacted by the situation? If not, when was the last time input or perspective was gathered from the community members who are impacted?
2. **Have we taken an inventory of past communications about the situation?**
 - What has been communicated?
 - Who has received communications?
 - How were past communications shared?
 - What are the known results of those communications?
3. **Should new communications update or correct what has been shared in the past?**
 - What do we know now that we didn't know before?
 - Are we adding to or changing guidance?
4. **What relationships do we maintain with community leaders that we could activate?** Could they be activated to:
 - Gain additional perspective?
 - Partner with us when we communicate?

The H.E.A.R.T. of Public Health Communications

H

Humility

Acknowledge the complexity of the situation and information, and the requests you are asking of your audience. Provide any relevant historical context when appropriate.

Honesty

Be truthful about the situation and the information you currently know. Be explicit about your intentions, the sources you are using to gather more information, and where resource or information gaps exist.

E

Engagement

Build relationships with trusted leaders to help tailor and deliver messaging to your community. Prioritize outreach to community members who are underrepresented or those at higher risk of adverse health outcomes.

Equity

Applying an equity lens to your work can reduce barriers to understanding and increase connection. Consider plain language, health literacy levels, and inclusive imagery when communicating.

A

Accessibility

Ensure your materials can be used by all members of your audience. When designing new content, discuss translations, check the contrast between background and text colors, use alt text on digital images, and confirm your digital platforms are ADA compliant.

Authenticity

Tailor communications to the unique characteristics of your primary and secondary audiences. Invite members of these audiences to provide input on your communications to ensure authenticity.

R

Resonance

Use first-person materials such as stories, imagery, and audio to enhance the stickiness of your messages. Infusing personal narratives will strengthen the connection to your communications.

Reach

Experiment with new communications channels and mediums that can increase exposure to your communications. Consider a variety of formats, such as digital, print, or in-person.

T

Transcreation

Materials that are literally translated can often lose resonance. Consider transcreation in partnership with native speakers to inject creativity and cultural competence into your work.

Transparency

Update your community on outcomes and lessons learned. Share future opportunities to contribute to message testing, resource feedback, and partnership-building.

Putting H.E.A.R.T. into Your Public Health Communications

Listening well and asking the right questions can position you to communicate with H.E.A.R.T. It's important to remember, though, that there is no perfect formula for communicating with H.E.A.R.T. Each situation will present unique challenges and opportunities. Sometimes you will be able to communicate more of one aspect of H.E.A.R.T. than another, and that's okay. The following sample situations focus on how effective listening and asking good questions can bring an individual element of H.E.A.R.T. to life to help you build connections and trust within your community.

Situation #1: Chronic Disease

You are the Director of Communications for your county's public health department. In your county and state, 35% of the residents have obesity, a rate that has not dropped in several years. You and your colleagues across the county are strategizing ways to raise awareness of the crisis and guide residents to available resources in your county.

BRING SOME H.E.A.R.T.

HUMILITY AND HONESTY

- Ask community members what they think about the county's struggle with obesity and what solutions they believe could help reduce the rate.
- Engage with local clinicians on their recent observations about the obesity challenge and share this partnership in your communications with community members.
- Share the rate of obesity and why it matters for the health of the entire community.
- Communicate what supports are currently available to community members and what the county is doing to improve them to better support the community.

Situation #2: Environment

Your county water system has been tested, and the Consumer Confidence Report has been shared with residents. It shows that lead was detected in the water supply that services one high school and two middle schools—all in communities with historically low incomes. You've been asked to help communicate the Report's results to residents.

BRING SOME H.E.A.R.T.

ENGAGEMENT & EQUITY

- Inform trusted community partners and leaders in the impacted community, including local influencers, faith-based organizations, and emergency response leaders. Provide them with easy-to-use information to help them activate and share your messages about the situation.
- Share the report's results through multiple communications channels within the impacted community and ensure there are multiple in-person and online opportunities for the community to provide feedback.
- Produce messaging that is easy to find, understand, and use, in languages common in your community.
- Communicate with visuals that can overcome language barriers and literacy levels by clearly conveying the concern with the water system and the danger that is presented.



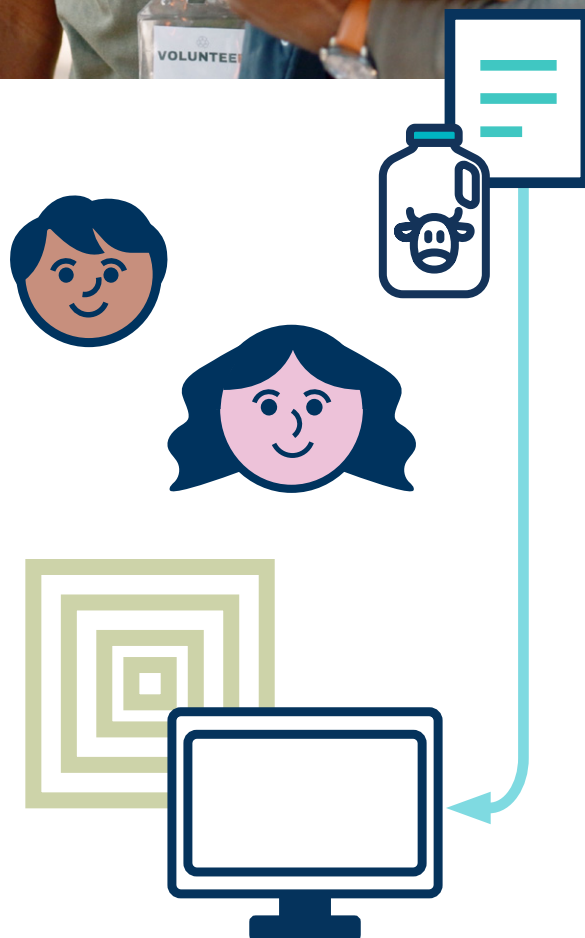
Situation #3: Food Safety

In a neighboring county, across the state line, there have been reports of an E. coli outbreak linked to spinach. Your public health department has been receiving a high volume of emails and social media messages about whether the outbreak is real, if it is impacting your county, and what actions residents should take.

BRING SOME H.E.A.R.T.

ACCESSIBILITY & AUTHENTICITY

- Be aware of the types of inbound channels being used to ask questions to help you calibrate the volume, frequency, and customization that may be needed in your outbound messages.
- Invite local grocers, agricultural producers, educators, or clinicians to participate in a rapid response team to assess the messages you are creating in response to the situation.
- Produce and distribute communications in languages common in your community and with sensitivity to community members who may experience difficulty reading, hearing, or seeing
- Communicate when the issue was first identified and what steps were taken to ensure accurate and efficient communications with the community.



Situation #4: Mental Health

You work as a public health communicator in one of the 500+ counties in the United States without a local psychologist, psychiatrist, or counselor. Your county is considered rural and one that has suffered economically for the past several years.

BRING SOME H.E.A.R.T.

RESONANCE & REACH

- Determine if you can identify a local story of someone willing to share their experience with trying to access mental health support, what they encountered in trying to access care, and what lessons they learned in their journey.
- Build new relationships with national organizations that may have experience, expertise, and resources that you can bring to your community, such as the [National Association of Counties](#) and [Mental Health First Aid from the National Council for Mental Wellbeing](#).

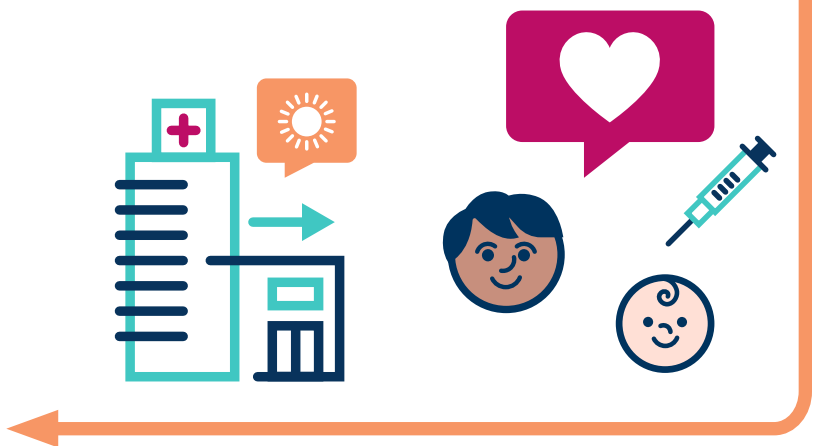
Situation #5: Vaccines

As a communicator in your state's public health department, you know that kindergartners in your state have one of the lowest vaccination rates for measles in the country. You and your team are looking at various strategies and tactics to help increase the rate of vaccination for the disease.

BRING SOME H.E.A.R.T.

TRANSCREATION & TRANSPARENCY

- Take a fresh look at the vaccine resources available for community members to determine how well they reflect culturally driven communications best practices.
- Invite community members from various cultures to contribute to the creation of the messaging for an upcoming back-to-school campaign.
- Engage community members to take part in focus groups to increase your understanding of local hesitations or resistance to measles vaccination.
- Before finalizing back-to-school readiness campaigns, request input from community leaders and residents about the vaccination messaging you are considering.



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Resources used in the creation of this content: *Are You Listening to Respond or to Understand?* | [Psychology Today](#)
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