Three Tips for More Effective Public Health Communication

Montana Public Health Association
April 13, 2022

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About the Center for Health and Safety Culture

We are an interdisciplinary center serving communities and organizations through research, training, and guidance to cultivate healthy and safe cultures.

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Core Issues

Traffic Safety

Substance Misuse

Domestic Violence

Child Wellbeing

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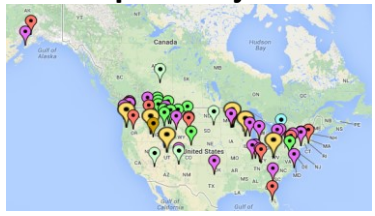
Map of Projects



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got milk?®

CALIFORNIA MILK PROCESSOR BOARD

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National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign

"Most analyses showed no effects from the campaign. At one round, however, more ad exposure predicted less intention to avoid marijuana use and weaker antidrug social norms…"

Hornik, R., Jacobsohn, L., Orwin, R., Piesse, A., & Kalton, G. (2008). Effects of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign on Youths. *American Journal of Public Health, 98*(12), 2229–2236.

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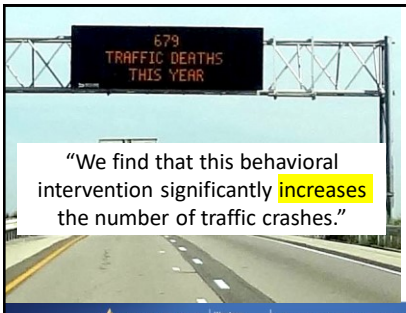

"We find that this behavioral intervention significantly increases the number of traffic crashes."

"Our back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that fatality messages cause an additional 2,600 crashes and 16 fatalities per year in Texas alone, with a total social cost of $377 million per year."

Hall, J. D., & Madsen, J. (2020). *Can Behavioral Interventions Be Too Salient? Evidence From Traffic Safety Messages* (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3633014). Social Science Research Network.

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Purpose

Improve effectiveness of public health communication by sharing three tips:

- Raise Concern and Hope
- Focus on Beliefs (3 kinds of beliefs that influence behavior)
- Reduce Psychological Reactance

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Three Tips

1. **Raise Concern and Hope**
2.
3.

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Define Concern

1. to have an influence on
   - *"The problem concerns us all."*
2. to be a care, trouble, or distress to
   - *"Her health concerns me."*

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Concern. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved June 1, 2021, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concern

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Why Raise Concern?

- Need people to engage

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What is the difference between **concern** and **fear**?

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Fear Appeals can…

have **unintended adverse effects** associated with public health communication activities:

1. label and stigmatize,
2. expand social gaps, and
3. promote poor health as a value.

Guttman, N., & Salmon, C. T. (2004). Guilt, fear, stigma and knowledge gaps: Ethical issues in public health communication interventions. *Bioethics*, 18(6) 531-553.

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"Humiliation, shame, guilt and angst are not the primary engines of change.

Ironically, such experiences can even immobilize the person, rendering change more remote."

Page 12, Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2002). *Motivational Interviewing, Second Edition: Preparing People for Change* (2nd ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.

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Three Lessons

1. **Raise Concern and Hope**
2.
3.

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Define Hope

"the **perceived capability** to derive **pathways** to desired goals and **motivate oneself via agency thinking** to use those pathways."

- **Willingness to move forward** (the will)
- **Seeing a path forward** (the way)

Snyder, C. R. (2002). Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind. *Psychological Inquiry*, *13*(4), 249–275.

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Why Raise Hope?

- Need *directed* engagement
- Need energy

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What does raising hope look like?

- "Most people use a seat belt."
- "Vaccinations help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Visit XYZ.org to learn how to get yours."
- "Most people agree it is the driver's responsibility to ask others to use a seat belt."

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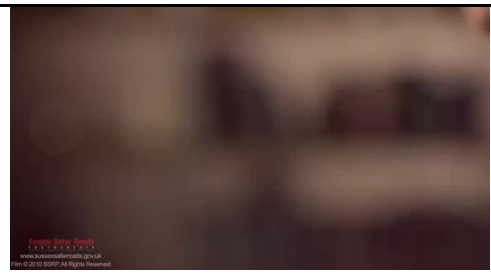

Embrace Life Video

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Reflection Question

How do you raise **HOPE** about your issues?

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Three Tips

1. **Raise Concern and Hope**
2.
3.

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Three Tips

1. Raise Concern and Hope
2. **Focus on Beliefs**
3.

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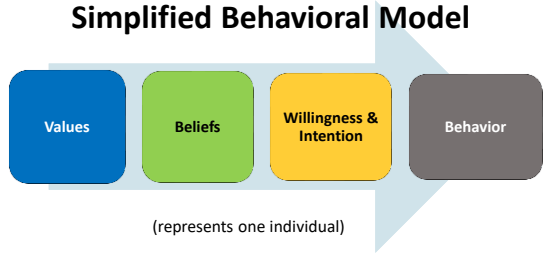
Simplified Behavioral Model



(represents one individual)

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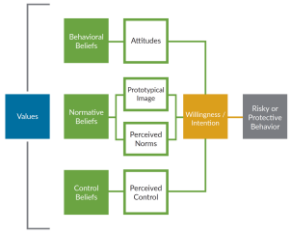
Behavioral Model



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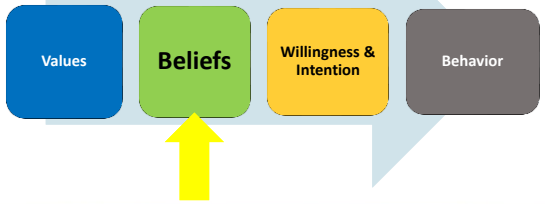
Simplified Behavioral Model



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Three Kinds of Beliefs

Behavioral beliefs are expectations about engaging in a behavior that inform attitudes.

Examples
- "I can dance better when I drink." (positive expectancy)
- "I don't like getting sick when I drink too much." (negative expectancy)
- 69% of MN adults indicated driving after drinking alcohol was dangerous.*
- 53% of MN adults agreed impairment begins with the first sip of alcohol.*

*Source: Survey of Rural Adults in MN, 2017, n= 723. Not representative of all adults.

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Three Kinds of Beliefs

Normative beliefs are an individual's perceptions of what is common and expected about a behavior.

Examples
- "Most students in my school drink." (common or typical behavior)
- "My parents do not want me to drink." (expected)
- 84% of MN adults perceived that most people in their community had driven impaired in the past 30 days.*
- 79% of MN adults believed that most people in their community disapprove of driving impaired.*

*Source: Survey of Rural Adults in MN, 2017, n= 723. Not representative of all adults.

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Three Kinds of Beliefs

Control beliefs are an individual's perceptions of their general ability to engage (or not engage) in a behavior.

Examples
- "If I wanted to, I could go to a party and not drink."
- "If I am with that group of friends, I am likely to end up drinking."
- 40% of MN adults reported they were very comfortable asking a driver to stop reading or typing on a cell phone.*

*Source: Survey of Rural Adults in MN, 2017, n= 723. Not representative of all adults.

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Reflection Questions

- In your communication efforts, how well do you focus on growing beliefs?
- How well do you focus on growing
  - Behavioral Beliefs
  - Normative Beliefs
  - Control Beliefs

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Three Tips

1. Raise Concern and Hope
2. Focus on Beliefs (Behavioral, Normative, & Control)
3. **Reduce Psychological Reactance**

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Psychological Reactance

Psychological reactance occurs when an individual feels their freedom or ability to choose is threatened.

- By a message, rule, policy, or a law
- Attempt to reinstate or restore some sense of their freedom
  - Discount information
  - Do the opposite

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Reflection

Take a moment and consider if any of your communication efforts could induce psychological reactance.

(That is, threaten a person's freedom or ability to choose.)

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Reducing Psychological Reactance

Messaging Considerations

1. Message Style

- Consider the language that is used in persuasive messaging.
- Use a narrative or storytelling approach.

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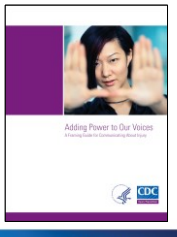
Reducing Psychological Reactance

Messaging Considerations

2. Message Structure

- Consider how the message is framed.

"A Framing Guide for Communicating About Injury"



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Reducing Psychological Reactance

Messaging Considerations

3. Message Content

- Offer behavioral choices.
- Promote critical thinking and social regulation.
- Emphasize empathy and prosocial behaviors.
- Accentuate perspective taking.
- Strengthen self-regulatory mechanisms.

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Reducing Psychological Reactance

Messaging Considerations

4. Message Delivery
   - Consider who is delivering the message.

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Three Tips

1. Raise Concern and Hope
2. Focus on Beliefs (Behavioral, Normative, & Control)
3. Reduce Psychological Reactance
   (style, structure, content, & delivery)

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