Reframing the Obesity Conversation

Why Is the Obesity "Selfie" Frame Problematic?

Obesity is a complex issue that has received increasing media attention in recent years. However, most stories focus on the individual, rather than on the impact of policy and environmental factors on individual health.[1] Given the complexity of obesity, public health advocates need a network of partners to share responsibility for improving access to healthy eating and physical activity opportunities. To build this network, the larger community must view obesity as a place-based challenge and not as a personal shortcoming. Unfortunately, the way obesity is currently regarded across the U.S. has narrowed the understanding of the value of environmental and policy strategies.

Research suggests that most Americans believe individuals can control their own health outcomes if they make healthy choices.[2] Because obesity is considered a personal problem, many believe hard work, discipline, and self-determination are the solutions, not the conditions that inhibit healthy behaviors. This view is like a "selfie," a photo at arm's reach that fails to capture the surrounding environment. When the public or decision makers have this individualistic view on obesity, they are not able to understand why solutions beyond behavior change are needed, the value of their involvement, or ways they can contribute to meaningful policy and place-based

> The personal responsibility narrative has become part of the American culture. We need to change this by showing how our surroundings shape and impact health.

changes. The "selfie" mentality revolves around the thinking that, for example, people should simply make smarter food choices or parents should just encourage their kids to be active. To be successful in addressing obesity, advocates need to show how surroundings shape and impact health, making the invisible visible. This doesn't mean people are not responsible for their behaviors; they should make smart choices but must not be held fully accountable unless their environments support their healthy decisions. In order to create these supportive environments, the public, and especially decision makers, need to see a broader picture.

What's the Value?

Values are ideals or abstract standards that are used by people to evaluate specific objects, individuals, and policies. It is understood that frames that target values can influence thought and opinions about the associated topic.[3]

Communicating messages that promote place-based solutions to complex public health problems like obesity requires advocates to frame the issue as a shared responsibility for solving problems between an individual and the environment.[5] Research conducted by FrameWorks Institute suggest that values, such as prevention, fairness, and ingenuity, have advantages in terms of eliciting policy support on obesity-related health issues.[1,2]

> "A frame is a thought organizer. Like a picture frame, it puts a rim around some part of the world, highlighting certain events and facts as important and rendering others invisible." — Gamson and Ryan[4]

Framing with the Prevention Value
Children perform better in school when they have opportunities to be active. We can prevent poor educational outcomes if our kids have daily physical education.

Framing with the Fairness Value
Children are healthier when they have healthy food to eat. It's not fair that some children in our community have access to healthy food, while others are surrounded by soda and junk food.

Framing with the Ingenuity Value
Choice is important, but good choices are not possible in many of our communities. This is a big problem since we know environments impact whether people are healthy. Let's work together to find innovative ways to ensure that healthy food is available in our corner stores.

When thinking about your message strategy, consider the context of your overall objective and target audience. For example, if your goal is for employers working with food vendors to offer healthier foods, you might talk about the can-do spirit of vendors collaborating with worksites to broaden their inventory with healthy food. But if you plan to require that all employers in your community institute a healthy meeting policy, you might make the case that it is the community's responsibility to ensure access to healthy food for all.

What About the Language?

When people see that environments affect health, they are more likely to support policies that improve those environments. Language can create a "frame of mind" that makes some ideas attractive and others not.[2] How obesity is described, or framed, can affect whether a solution has popular or decision-maker support. Framing is how our minds recognize patterns of ideas, sort them, and develop their meanings. It is the translation process between the things we see, read, or hear and the ideas already in our heads.[2]
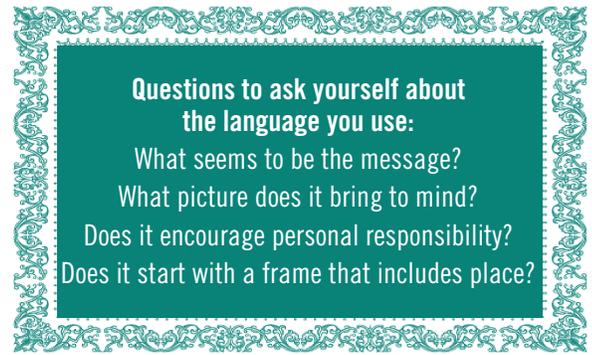
The order of our statements matter. FrameWorks Institute[6] and Berkeley Media Studies Group[7] suggest a messaging sequence when advocating for policy and environmental change, regardless of outcome, audience, or messenger. As portrayed in the figure below, a message should describe an environment that prohibits good health upfront and then present the elements that promote good health. Be succinct by only mentioning the environmental factors that are most closely related to your issue. Next, emphasize values that you feel will motivate your target audience and provide a simple description of your proposed strategy or solution. Messages should be steadfast but tailored, so your target audience, no matter who it is, can support your vision.

Sequence | Sample Message

Prompt the environment

{ Children are healthier when their communities provide healthy food. Unfortunately, healthy food isn't easily found in our neighborhood, and soda is cheaper than water. }

Introduce meaningful values

{ It is not fair that families who live far away from the supermarket have difficulty eating healthy food regularly. }

State the strategy clearly

{ We need neighborhood stores to offer fresh, affordable, healthy food, and our Creating Healthy Schools and Communities funds can help make this happen. }

Want to Talk a Little More?

In addition to obesity being perceived as personal responsibility, obesity solutions are often contentious. Both political and commercial concerns compete with obesity prevention goals. Whether it's a policy to promote healthy eating options in hospital cafeterias or one to restrict the marketing of unhealthy food at schools, there will be individuals working to protect their interests. In order to galvanize supporters, public health advocates must feel comfortable stating their proposed solutions clearly. Reframing obesity requires that we think about the values that guide us as a society along with a frame that incorporates context beyond a "selfie." Our challenge as public health advocates is to demonstrate that environments can be changed to support more informed behaviors.

Sources:

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