



Shifting the Conversation:

A Focus on the
Social Determinants
of Health & Health Equity





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A Focus on the Social Determinants of Health & Health Equity

Health is determined by broad social and economic factors that are often beyond our personal control and health inequities are associated with the premature deaths of 40,000 Canadians every year¹. Yet focusing our attention on these broad factors which determine health can be difficult. In many public venues, health is framed as being driven mostly by individual lifestyle factors and the health care system. It is relatively easy to focus on this because it is tangible and what we are most familiar with. Shifting the conversation about what determines our health is a vital step to taking action to address the root causes of poor health. We need new ways to easily talk about health more broadly.

The purpose of this tool is to provide ideas and concrete examples of ways to communicate messages about the social determinants of health (sdoh) & health equity. The language we use has a big impact on how a message is received. This tool will help you think about how to frame messages to be conversation starters, to broaden viewpoints, and to resonate with diverse audiences.

This tool provides practical ways to support your work in developing messages to communicate with the general public, health care workers, policy/decision makers and others who may not have an extensive background in public health and sdoh. This tool can also support sharing results of new research findings or recent reports to further build our understanding of what the root causes of health are and how to address them. Use this resource to examine communications and build capacity for a broader understanding of health and its determinants.

This tool is intended to be a living document which will be tried out and revised based on user feedback. You are invited to use this tool and develop your own messages, help us build a collection of messages, and make it easy and practical for use by yourself and others.



Lessons Learned^{2,3,4,5}

Lessons learned from four key resources have been synthesized here. Keep these broad ideas in mind when communicating about the sdoh & health equity.

- ✓ Take time to understand your audience and their frame of reference. The term ‘social determinants of health’ does not resonate with broad audiences. While this term makes sense to public health practitioners not everyone speaks about these issues in the same way. Incorporate your audiences’ frame of reference in your messages. For example, using the metaphor of health as ‘a journey’ has been found to speak to those who tend to understand health as determined mostly by individual behaviours.
- ✓ Start your messages with something that your intended audience already believes and values. This makes the concept more credible. For example messages that incorporate the importance of access to available quality health care, a value held by many Canadians, with the need to address the social factors that affect health were more convincing than those that did not discuss medical care at all. Use facts, imagery or stories to support your message.
- ✓ Acknowledge the role of personal responsibility and individual choice. We often avoid talking about these concepts in an attempt to move thinking away from this narrow focus. But including a statement on the role of individual lifestyle factors makes audiences more receptive to the idea that broader social and economic factors also have a role to play in ensuring that healthy choices are available for everyone. In doing this, we are using an individual lifestyle frame as the hook to move our audience to a broader environmental frame. You can do this by focusing on factors that influence an individual’s situation. For example focusing on “how the availability and accessibility of food stores helps ensure access to fruits and vegetables” instead of focusing on “getting people to choose to eat more fruits and vegetables”.
- ✓ Use one or two strong and compelling facts— a surprising point that arouses interest, attention and emotion. Avoid using a fact that is too striking because this may lead audiences to think you are stretching the truth or only picking only facts that support your message. Providing too many facts seems to weaken the message. Explain numbers, put them in context for your audience. For example rather than saying 48.6 % of people are affected by an issue you could say “almost one half” or “nearly 50%”. Also, consider how saying something like “an intervention would cost \$10 million over 5 years” might be of interest to policy makers, but saying “an intervention would cost \$2 a day for each Canadian” would make more sense for the general public.



- ✓ Identify the problem, but offer potential solutions that are ‘tryable’. When considering solutions continue to focus on the broader environmental frame. To do this we can shift the way we ask questions about solutions to identified problems. For example, in response to low breastfeeding rates in your area instead of asking “how can we get more women to breast feed?” ask, “what factors influence women’s ability to breast feed in our communities?” and focus on addressing those factors. Emphasize those parts of the environment that link most closely to the solutions you are seeking. Be sure to understand your audience and a potential decision maker’s scope of influence when suggesting a solution.
- ✓ Mix traditionally conservative/right with traditionally progressive/left values. One suggested pattern is to start your message with a more right orientation (more lifestyle or health care orientation), move to a more left orientation (social/environmental orientation), and then return right by describing how a the social orientation can support individuals. Be sure to avoid partisan language in doing this and always end with a solution!
- ✓ Focus broadly on how sdoh affect everyone versus a specific ethnic group or socioeconomic class. Focusing on a specific group can actually reinforce negative stereotypes. Use pronouns such as *we* or *our* and avoid using *they* or *them*.
- ✓ Avoid jargon by expressing concepts. Describe the concept using concrete indicators and explaining implications. For example, rather than using a term like “food insecurity” you could say “when we don’t have enough of the right food, it holds us back from eating well”.



Messaging Template

This section includes a general template for crafting messages capturing the lessons learned outlined above and some specific example messages using the template. This template can be used to create written or spoken messages to be used in articles, presentations, conversations, etc. This will require background preparation to complete such as reviewing evidence.

Issue: _____

Intended Audience: _____

Policy Options/Solutions you are seeking: _____

<p>Start with something your audience already believes in. This is starting right or more conservative. Use facts, imagery or stories.</p>	
<p>Connect this to a broader idea about the social determinants of health. This is moving left or more progressive (less conservative).</p> <p><i>Shift to an environmental frame!</i></p>	
<p>Support your idea with one thought provoking fact – arouse interest and make the point connect to real-life by using context appropriate to your audience.</p>	
<p>Relate this back to your more conservative starting idea. Show how broader environments can support individual lifestyles.</p>	
<p>End with a solution that is tryable.</p> <p>Focus your solution in the environmental frame!</p>	
<p>Check your language. Did you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - avoid jargon - avoid labels & stereotypes - use plain language - avoid politically loaded terms - provide concrete/meaningful examples 	



So let's try it out.

In this first example, we are communicating a general message about the role income plays in enabling people to eat healthy foods using local survey data (GASHA. Understanding our Health Survey, 2010).

Issue: Healthy Eating/Food Insecurity

Intended Audience: Provincial Policy Makers

Policy Options/Solutions you are Seeking: Adequate Liveable Incomes (Minimum & Living Wage)

Start with something your audience already believes in. This is starting right or more conservative. Use facts, imagery or stories.	Eating right helps us be healthy and supports us to live well and avoid illness.
Connect this to a broader idea about the social determinants of health. This is moving left or more progressive (less conservative). Shift to an environmental frame!	But did you know that not everyone in our community can make choices that allow them to eat well? Families that cannot afford the basics in life are struggling to have enough money to buy healthy food.
Support your idea with one thought provoking fact – arouse interest and make the point connect to real-life by using context appropriate to your audience.	Local health surveys have found that community members with an annual household income of less than \$20,000 reported that they and others in their house did not have enough food or the types of food they would want to eat to be healthy.
Relate this back to your more conservative starting idea. Show how broader environments can support individual lifestyles.	Having an adequate income is needed to support everyone to eat well and reduce risk for disease.
End with a solution that is tryable. Focus your solution in the environmental frame!	Increasing minimum wage to reflect a true living wage will support low wage workers to meet their basic needs for food and other health essentials and is necessary to support people to make healthy food choices.
Check your language. Did you: - avoid jargon - avoid labels & stereotypes - use plain language - avoid politically loaded terms - provide concrete/meaningful examples	



As another example, we are communicating a general message about the affordability of dental services in supporting good oral health for all. This was prompted by a report release from the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences, Oral Health Report, 2014.

Issue: Access to Dental Services

Intended Audience: Federal & Provincial Policy Makers

Policy Options/Solutions you are Seeking: Provide Public Dental Services for Vulnerable Populations

<p>Start with something your audience already believes in. This is starting right or more conservative. Use facts, imagery or stories.</p>	<p>Good dental health is a key building block of a healthy life. We need healthy teeth to eat healthy foods and there is a strong link between oral health and diseases in other areas of the body. Visiting the dentist regularly is something that will help us live well and avoid illness.</p>
<p>Connect this to a broader idea about the social determinants of health. This is moving left or more progressive (less conservative).</p> <p>Shift to an environmental frame!</p>	<p>But did you know that not everyone in our community is able to access quality dental care? Individuals and families that do not have insurance coverage are often not accessing dental services due to fees they are unable to pay for.</p>
<p>Support your idea with one thought provoking fact – arouse interest and make the point connect to real-life by using context appropriate to your audience.</p>	<p>A national oral health report found that about 17% of the entire Canadian population, or approximately 6 million people, did not visit a dentist in 2009 due to the high cost of such services. This report also found that those with the most oral health problems are also those who have the most difficulty accessing oral health care due to financial reasons.</p>
<p>Relate this back to your more conservative starting idea. Show how broader environments can support individual lifestyles.</p>	<p>Everyone deserves adequate opportunities to access dental services in order to maintain good oral and overall health.</p>
<p>End with a solution that is tryable.</p> <p>Focus your solution in the environmental frame!</p>	<p>Creating and supporting more public options for oral health care to ensure access to essential dental services for those without private insurance will support everyone to have the opportunity to achieve good health.</p>
<p>Check your language. Did you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - avoid jargon - avoid labels & stereotypes - use plain language - avoid politically loaded terms - provide concrete/meaningful examples 	



As another example, this message is intended to communicate findings from a research study (NEWPATH report on Diet and Food Environment Findings) which emphasizes the role of the physical environmental in supporting healthy eating

Issue: Healthy Eating/Physical Food Environments

Intended Audience: Municipal Policy Makers

Policy Options/Solutions you are Seeking: Increased Fresh Food Outlets/Decreased Convenience & Fast Food Outlets

<p>Start with something your audience already believes in. This is starting right or more conservative. Use facts, imagery or stories.</p>	<p>Eating healthy foods is important for good health and is something that supports us all to live well and avoid illness.</p>
<p>Connect this to a broader idea about the social determinants of health. This is moving left or more progressive (less conservative).</p> <p>Shift to an environmental frame!</p>	<p>But did you know that where we live has a big impact on what we eat? When stores in our communities overwhelmingly promote the selection of unhealthy foods, people eat poorer diets.</p>
<p>Support your idea with one thought provoking fact – arouse interest and make the point connect to real-life by using context appropriate to your audience.</p>	<p>For example, a recent study in the region of Waterloo Ontario, found that roughly just over 39% of residents were eating a poor quality diet overall and another 60% had a diet in need of improvement. Findings also showed that convenience stores and fast food outlets were five times more common than grocery and specialty stores within a kilometre of the study participants' homes.</p>
<p>Relate this back to your more conservative starting idea. Show how broader environments can support individual lifestyles.</p>	<p>It is not acceptable that people in this community are literally swamped with less healthy foods and that healthy foods take much more time and effort to access.</p>
<p>End with a solution that is tryable.</p> <p>Focus your solution in the environmental frame!</p>	<p>It's time to start thinking about how our communities are built and create spaces where people can easily access the foods they need to support their health. Pop up fresh food markets, and healthy convenience stores could go a long way in changing the local food environments.</p>
<p>Check your language. Did you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - avoid jargon - avoid labels & stereotypes - use plain language - avoid politically loaded terms - provide concrete/meaningful examples 	



The next example emphasizes the role of our physical environment in promoting energy drink consumption to children as opposed to focusing on the responsibility of parents to not allow their kids to consume energy drinks. (Nova Scotia DHW. Marketing to Children & Youth: A Public Health Primer)

Issue: Marketing of Energy Drinks to Children & Youth

Intended Audience: Private Sector/Retailers

Policy Options/Solutions you are Seeking: Reducing Promotion/Sales of Energy Drinks to Children & Youth

<p>Start with something your audience already believes in. This is starting right or more conservative. Use facts, imagery or stories.</p>	<p>All young people need energy in order to grow, learn and thrive. Getting enough sleep and eating healthy foods will give youth the energy they need each day.</p>
<p>Connect this to a broader idea about the social determinants of health. This is moving left or more progressive (less conservative).</p> <p>Shift to an environmental frame!</p>	<p>Energy drinks are not recommended for those under 18 years of age. But did you know that youth and children are frequently exposed to energy drink marketing in the media and in public places? Energy drink logos are often found at community events, family restaurants and other public places. As a result of this exposure, youth are drawn to purchase and consume energy drinks.</p>
<p>Support your idea with one thought provoking fact – arouse interest and make the point connect to real-life by using context appropriate to your audience.</p>	<p>In 2012, approximately 64% of youth participating in the Nova Scotia Student Drug Use Survey reported previous consumption of energy drinks.</p>
<p>Relate this back to your more conservative starting idea. Show how broader environments can support individual lifestyles.</p>	<p>It is not acceptable that children and youth are surrounded by marketing messages from the energy drink industry, which makes it difficult to recognize healthy beverage choices.</p>
<p>End with a solution that is tryable.</p> <p>Focus your solution in the environmental frame!</p>	<p>It's time to consider the private sectors role in creating supportive food environments where youth are not exposed to the marketing of beverages that are inappropriate for them to consume. Reducing the prevalence of energy drink ads and the availability of these beverages in public markets is necessary to support children and families to make healthy beverage choices.</p>
<p>Check your language. Did you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - avoid jargon - avoid labels & stereotypes - use plain language - avoid politically loaded terms - provide concrete/meaningful examples 	



Other Ways of talking about SDOH & Health Equity Concepts^{2,3,4,5}

We may not always have a lot of space or time to get our message across such as in everyday conversations or when trying to craft a message for twitter or face book. Below are some phrases and alternative wording for common messages that may connect to a broader array of audiences related to SDOH & health equity.

Health starts—long before illness—in our homes, schools and jobs.

Health is not just the absence of disease.

All members of our community should have the opportunity to make the choices that allow them to live a long, healthy life, regardless of their income, education or ethnic background.

Your neighborhood or job shouldn't be hazardous to your health.

Your opportunity for health starts long before you need medical care.

Health begins where we live, learn, work and play.

The opportunity for health begins in our families, neighborhoods, schools and jobs.

To talk about health disparities/inequalities/inequities you could try...

- Raising the bar for everyone
- Setting a fair and adequate baseline of care for all
- Lifting everyone up
- Giving everyone a chance to live a healthy life

Rather than use the language 'poor' people try...

- People who live in poverty
- Families who can't afford the basics in life
- People struggling to get by

Instead of Vulnerable populations try...

- People whose circumstances have made them vulnerable to poor health
- Too many Canadians don't have the same opportunities to be as healthy as others





Now it is your turn to try this out. Use the template to create a message about a health equity issue that you see in your everyday work and are passionate about. Share your message with us. Tell us what it was like to use the tool and any ways it can be improved.

Please send any feedback or messages you would like to share to:

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More Food for Thought:

1. What opportunities do you have in your public health practice to shift the conversation about what determines health?
2. How can we shift our language in everyday practice to support a broader conversation about health?
3. What key audiences do we need to focus on in shifting the conversation about health?
4. What can our organization do to support us in framing our messages for broader audiences?



REFERENCES

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5. What Surrounds Us Shapes Us: Making the Case for Environmental Change. Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2009. [http://www.bmsg.org/pdfs/Talking Upstream.pdf](http://www.bmsg.org/pdfs/Talking_Upstream.pdf)

In addition to these references more ideas and resources can be found at:

- Wellesley Institute. Our City, Our Society, Our Health. Making the Connections <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-3mUiGi6bA>
- GASHA. Let's Start A Conversation about Health. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GEIWk2xYvI>
- Sudbury & District Health Unit. Let's Start a Conversation About Health...and Not Talk About Health Care at All: User Guide. [http://www.sdhu.com/uploads/content/listings/EN LetsStartaConversationUserGuide Sept 20 2011.pdf](http://www.sdhu.com/uploads/content/listings/EN_LetsStartaConversationUserGuide_Sept_20_2011.pdf)

