



Strengthening Trust in Public Health

Countering misinformation, distrust in government, and political polarization.

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The allure of misinformation.

- Often grounded in real fear or uncertainty.
- Distrust in institutions.
- Can contain some nugget of truth that is then distorted.
- Uses compelling storytelling and personal experiences to evoke strong emotions and recall.
- Can be easier to access and understand compared to complex data or scientific or academic reports and articles!

Water fluoridation is a public health success story.

- Safe and effective intervention to prevent cavities for everyone.
- Equitable and requires no changes in individual behaviors.
- You need the right amount of fluoride to get the benefits.
- Tooth decay has big impacts.
- **Water fluoridation programs have been challenged in cities and towns across the state.**



So, why do some groups distrust or oppose it?

- Misinterpreting data and studies.
 - Correlation \neq causation; fluoride dose was more than double U.S. level.
- Misinformation feeds on fear.
 - “The stuff they put in the water to fluoridate it is actually a toxic waste from the phosphate fertilizer industry.”
 - Resident shared how three of his children had taken fluoride vitamins as infants, and each of those children needed oral surgery for crooked teeth, while the fourth, who did not take fluoride, did not.
- Valuing personal freedom to make their own decisions related to their health.
 - “You can’t put a price tag on American Freedom.”

Routine childhood vaccines save lives.

- Children are protected against 14 vaccine-preventable diseases by age 2.
- Serious vaccine side effects are extremely rare.
- There is no link between vaccines and autism.
- **91% of Vermont kindergarteners were fully immunized in 2023-2024 school year (less than 95% needed), making schools vulnerable to outbreaks.**



So, why are some parents delaying or choosing not to vaccinate?

- Confuse “natural” and better.
 - Natural immunity, fear of chemicals or ingredients
- Distrust of pharmaceutical companies or governmental agencies.
- Misinformation feeds on parents’ fears.
 - Emotional stories of “vaccine injuries” and children being diagnosed with autism after receiving MMR vaccines.
 - Question why so many vaccines are needed.
 - May not understand the risks of not vaccinating.
- Valuing personal freedom to make their own decisions related to their child’s health.

What can public health professionals do?

Meet audiences where they are and with people they trust.

- Start with common ground (healthy families, communities, quality of life).
- Lead with empathy and humility by acknowledging real-life concerns, questions, and obstacles.
- Be transparent about any risks or uncertainties.
- Encourage asking questions and consulting with trusted messengers instead of taking our word for it.
- Look for non-traditional messengers that share our goals and can help reach new audiences.
- Intentionally and continually show up in the spaces your audience is in.

Build connections through storytelling.

- People might not remember every fact or figure, but they will remember how we made them feel.
- Share stories of real people, organizations and communities who benefited from everyday public health programs and services.
- Spotlight public health workers through profiles, interviews, or “day in the life” features to demonstrate the humanity, dedication and expertise from those working behind the scenes. Weave in relatable details!

Reinforce public health in every interaction.

- Existing confusion or misunderstanding of public health.
- Help people understand what public health is and how it shows up in their everyday lives.
- Connect the dots back to public health when sharing about a specific topic, program or service.
- Reframe health as physical, mental and social well-being, not just absence of illness.

Thank you!

Let's stay in touch.

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