

How to Use Empathy in Health Communication

Use the tips in this fact sheet to write clear, inclusive content that resonates with your audience.

What is empathy?

Empathy means understanding and sharing the feelings of another person — it's our ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes.

Why is empathy important in environmental health communication?

Health communicators help people make decisions to improve their health. Empathy can help make a connection and build trust with your audience — which makes it more likely that they'll follow your public health recommendations.

5 tips for communicating with empathy

1 Acknowledge uncertainty and challenges. People often feel vulnerable in uncertain situations — like when they're facing a health threat. Check out these tips:

- **Be honest about what you don't know.** Acknowledge that researchers are still learning new information and that the situation might change over time.
- **Emphasize what you do know.** State the facts based on the latest science and cite trustworthy sources.
- **Help people spot misinformation and pseudoscience.** Encourage readers to get trustworthy information from their local health department, university, or community groups. If they have specific health concerns, suggest that they talk with their health care provider.

2 Write for your audience. Materials that are relevant to your readers help them feel seen and heard. Consider these strategies:

- **Learn about your readers.** What are their communication needs and preferences? How much do they already know about the topic? What barriers could keep them from accessing information? Taking time to research community demographics and context is a great first step.
- **Ask your audience.** The best way to learn about your readers' concerns and questions is to get their input — through user testing (e.g., surveys and focus groups) or by reaching out to your personal or professional networks.



- 3 Use clear and inclusive language.** Writing with empathy means writing in a way people can understand and relate to. Use these tips:
- **Write how you talk.** Use a friendly, conversational tone to make materials approachable.
 - **Choose simple words.** And if you have to use a complex or technical term, define it.
 - **Use inclusive, respectful terms.** For example, use “partner” instead of “husband/wife” and “pregnant people” instead of “pregnant women” to be more inclusive.

- 4 Make your advice easy to act on.** Empathetic health communication includes providing manageable action steps. Try these tips:
- **Give clear action steps.** Be specific about what to do and how to do it. Tell readers how they’ll benefit from taking action.
 - **Make sure action steps are doable.** Consider barriers that might prevent readers from acting. For example, if lack of health insurance is a barrier for your readers, link to resources for free or low-cost health services.

- 5 Choose relatable and authentic visuals.** Visuals can help people see themselves in your materials. Use these strategies:
- **Prioritize diversity.** Include people of different ages, races and ethnicities, genders, abilities, and body types.
 - **Choose realistic images.** Show people in everyday situations and settings. Avoid staged, overly glamorous-looking images.
 - **Avoid reinforcing stereotypes.** For example, don’t show only white male doctors in a material for health care providers.

Consider person- vs. identity-first language — and try to use what your audience prefers. Many people learn that person-first language (“person experiencing homelessness,” not “homeless person”) is always the most respectful approach. But some groups prefer identity-first language (“deaf person,” not “person who is deaf”). If you’re not sure, talk to members of your intended audience or research community groups online.



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