

Talking About Mental Health Through a Systems Lens

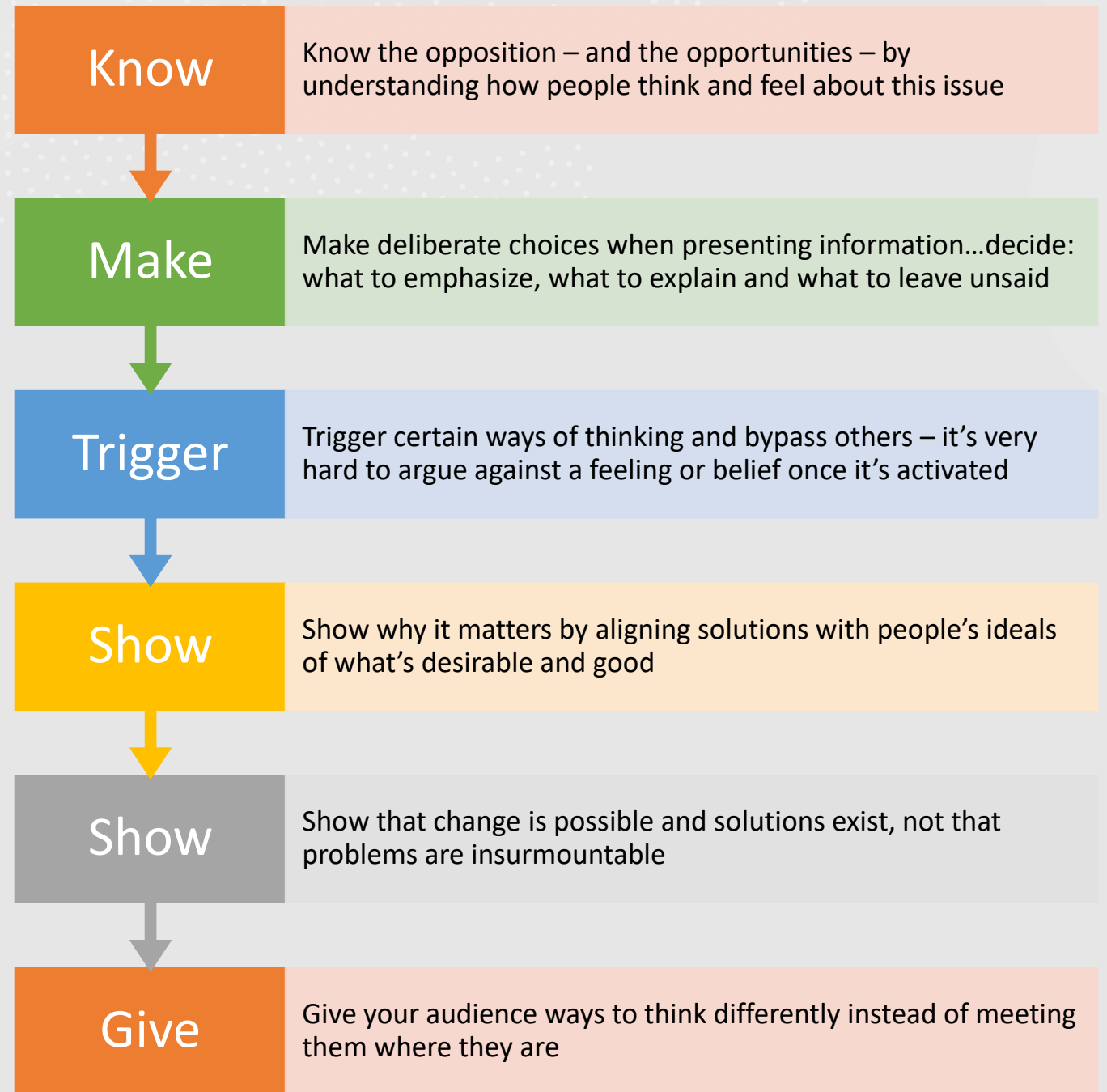
Public Health Communications
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Innovative Solutions for the Common Good

FrameWorks Methodology - to frame an issue:



Upstream Focus – Systems Solutions

Social problems like racial discrimination and inequity harm children's ability to develop positive mental health. That's because discriminatory practices in housing, employment, schooling and so on, place extra stress on families who feel the effects of this inequitable treatment. This stress can compromise families' strong, healthy attachments. Without those strong attachments, children struggle to develop trust and mastery of the world around them. If we make sure that communities facing discriminatory practices have better access to the resources that have historically been denied to them, like affordable housing and job opportunities we can better support mental health in El Dorado County.

Existing Frames/Assumptions

Common Assumptions

General:

- Absence of Illness –mental health is the absence of disorder—if no visible signs of distress, mental health must be in a positive state
- Mental Health = Emotional Health/ability to deal effectively with negative emotions
- Mental illness is a chemical imbalance in the brain

Children:

- Trauma changes the brain/behavior – trauma, abuse and neglect (i.e., things that happen at home) can have long term effects on child mental health
- Young children don't have mental health because they can't remember
- Parental awareness – If parents don't support their children's mental health, it is because they don't know that children experience positive or negative mental health

Small Group Exercise #1 – What’s wrong with these Existing Frames?

Group 1 – what’s wrong with these existing frames?

General:

- Absence of Illness –mental health is the absence of disorder—if no visible signs of distress, mental health must be in a positive state
- Mental Health = Emotional Health/ability to deal effectively with negative emotions
- Mental illness is a chemical imbalance in the brain

Group 2 – what’s wrong with these existing frames?

Children:

- Trauma changes the brain/behavior – trauma, abuse and neglect (i.e., things that happen at home) can have long term effects on child mental health
- Young children don’t have mental health because they can’t remember
- Parental awareness – If parents don’t support their children’s mental health, it is because they don’t know that children experience positive or negative mental health

Existing Frames – Group Exercise answers

General

- Absence of Illness –mental health is the absence of disorder-- **fails to trigger systemic solutions**
- Mental Health = Emotional Health/ability to deal effectively with negative emotions – **triggers individual responsibility solutions**
- Mental illness is a chemical imbalance in the brain – **triggers individual medical models**

Children

- Trauma changes the brain/behavior – trauma, abuse and neglect (i.e., things that happen at home) can have long term effects on child mental health – **triggers individual responsibility solutions**
- Young children don't have mental health because they can't remember – **fails to trigger systemic solutions**
- Parental awareness – If parents don't support their children's mental health, it is because they don't know that children experience positive or negative mental health – **triggers individual education models**

Reframing Recommendations

1. Define Mental Health as a positive state

- Mental health is a psychological state of wellbeing
- Mental health is the balance of an individual's thoughts, emotions and behaviors. It exists on a spectrum that spans the entire population. Mental health not simply the absence of mental illness.
- Children need our support for their strong mental health. The balance of behaviors, emotions and thoughts supports children's healthy brain development and lifelong health.

Reframing Recommendations

2. Focus on the society-wide benefits of positive mental health

- A focus on positive mental health in early childhood benefits all of us through things like more resilient families, better educational outcomes and in the long term, a stronger society.
- Mental *Illness* disrupts the thoughts, emotions and behaviors that support our wellbeing. These disruptions cause distress and interfere with our ability to function at work, at school, at home, in the community and in daily life.
- When we support health and wellbeing, we help everyone reach their full potential and contribute to their communities. If we invest in systems to ensure all people are able to get the services they need, we will have a healthier and stronger society.

Reframing Recommendations

3. Link children's mental health to broader societal issues and show reciprocity between parent and child mental health

- Many outside forces influence children's mental health. Financial instability, for example, can cause families enormous stress and anxiety. When parents experience a lot of stress, it can limit their ability to build strong relationships with children. This can disrupt children's ability to develop positive mental health and the resilience they need to learn how to manage life's challenges effectively. By taking steps to eliminate or buffer the effects of social problems like poverty, we can improve children's mental health and future wellbeing too.
- Children's mental health is affected by their caregivers' mental health and vice versa:
 - Children develop strong mental health through responsive interactions with adult caregivers.
 - Adult mental health can be shaped by the quality of interactions with the children they care for. Caring for a child with behavioral health problems can cause stress, exacerbating existing mental health issues.

Reframing Recommendations

4. Make solutions a vital part of the story

- We can promote strong mental health with an integrated health care system to enhance quality and improve access to care. This would lead to higher-quality mental health care and make it easier for people to see providers.
- Building an integrated care system that supports people at all stages – children, parents and older adults- is a smart way to make sure resources for wellbeing reach all areas in the community.
- We can help build up children’s resilience by supporting their caregivers. Strong, responsive relations with adults and experiences that support development make it easier for children to withstand adversity.
- Mental health supports and services for caregivers such as parenting programs and early interventions for anxiety and depression help foster supportive relationships and safe, stable, nurturing environments for children.

Values

Child well-being is important for community development and economic development. Young children with strong mental health are prepared and equipped to develop important skills and capacities that begin in early childhood. These children then become the basis of a prosperous and sustainable society—contributing to things like good school achievement, solid workforce skills, and being strong citizens. When we ensure the healthy development of the next generation, they will pay that back through productivity and responsible citizenship. Innovative states and communities have been able to design high-quality programs for children, which have solved problems in early childhood development and shown significant long-term improvements for children. As a society, we need to invent and replicate more effective policies and programs for young children.

Simplifying Models – Children’s Mental Health

Brain Architecture

- To explain how early childhood and mental health are related:
 - Use the brain architecture comparison to explain how the brain and by extension, children’s mental health develops in a step-by-step process that relies on a sturdy foundation.
 - *Like a house, children’s brains get built in a process that begins before birth and continues into early adulthood. The earliest years are a critical construction phase and it’s important to lay a strong foundation for everything.*
- **How:**
 - Incorporate the language of construction – building, support, foundation, blueprint, quality materials – to describe what happens during the development process
 - Explain that experiences build brains and shape children’s wellbeing and mental health
 - Remember the “Building Better Brains” video

Simplifying Models – Children’s Mental Health

Serve and Return

- To explain:
 - Early attachment
 - Importance of supportive interactions with a caregiver
 - Role of family-centered policies in supporting brain architecture
 - *Serve-and-return interactions between adults and young children build strong brains: when a baby “serves” by cooing or babbling and adults “return” the serve with positive interactions, that supports baby’s brain development or brain architecture. Parental stress can interrupt this bonding process, so policies that support parents’ mental health are great for babies’ mental health too!*
- **How:**
 - Compare early attachment to a game of tennis or soccer to explain how responsive, back-and-forth interactions support the brain-building process
 - Stress that this takes 2 players – parents need to be available, physically and emotionally
 - Explain how system-level decision (e.g., parental leave, flexible work schedules, access to mental health services, housing policy) can help or disrupt healthy serve-and-return interactions

Simplifying Models – Children’s Mental Health

Toxic Stress

- To explain the role that chronic stress, trauma or adversity have on children’s wellbeing
 - Chronic trauma, like hunger, poverty, abuse or neglect are examples of toxic stress that can harm how children’s brains are built. The effects of toxic stress can be lifelong, increasing the risk of chronic illness like heart disease and depression.
- **How:**
 - Explain that different kinds of stress – positive, tolerable or toxic – have different effects on children’s brains and bodies and that toxic stress can cause long-term harm to children’s health and wellbeing.
 - Explain that not all stressors have the same impact on young children’s wellbeing: some can be positive, like learning to walk; others like the death of a loved one, can be tolerable, if a child is supported by responsive, caring adults. But unmitigated, chronic stress is toxic.
 - Connect systemic issues like racial discrimination or financial insecurity to children’s experience of stress and adversity. Without buffering supports these stressors can be detrimental to development

Simplifying Models – Children’s Mental Health

Outcomes Scale

- To explain the interaction of genes, environments and experiences--to mental health outcomes:
 - *Child development is like tipping a scale in one direction. We can influence children’s ability to withstand adversity and stress by loading up their development scale with positive environments and experiences and removing/offloading negative ones.*
- **How:**
 - Compare child development to a scale that can tip towards negative or positive outcomes, depending on what kinds of weight (environments and experiences) are stacked or offloaded.
 - Stress that promoting positive mental health can tip children’s development in a positive direction
 - Explain that negative or positive experiences and environments as the weights that change a scale’s direction.
 - Show how those weights can be added or removed from the scale through policies.
 - Stacking positive weights builds children’s resiliency against negative experiences.



Group Exercise

Before:

Studies show that half of those who develop mental health disorders in adulthood show symptoms by age 14. Despite this knowledge, we continue to fail our children by ignoring problems until they reach crisis levels. Instead of investing in prevention and early intervention programs and providing access to appropriate services, we have unconscionable rates of suicide, school dropout, homelessness, substance abuse, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. We do important work to provide mental health services and supports for people who need it, but the overwhelming number of people in need reminds us that we often we wait too long to take action.

Group Exercise

What's wrong with the previous paragraph?

- Crisis messaging disengages audiences and depresses support for needed solutions by feeding a sense of “fatalism” – the belief that the problems we face are too big to fix.
- The focus here is on what happens when we don't prevent mental illness, whereas a more productive frame would illuminate the benefits of taking action to create positive mental health

Better

- We can prevent and mitigate the effects of many mental health disorders—but only if we respond appropriately to early signs and symptoms. Fortunately, these signs typically manifest years before a clinical disorder emerges. One effective way to prevent mental health disorders and improve outcomes is to take a more holistic and multigenerational approach. This includes ensuring that quality mental health services are available to all family members. We can also take steps to promote mental health at a population level. We can reduce risk factors, like lack of access to safe, affordable housing, and increase “protective factors,” like ensuring that quality parenting programs like Triple P.

Group #1 – Disparities

Before:

Black and Latino children experience mental health problems at a similar rate as their white peers, yet they are less likely to receive treatment, a new study of nationally representative data shows. For instance, Black and Latino children made 37 percent and 49 percent fewer visits to psychiatrists than white children, and 47 percent and 58 percent fewer visits to any mental health professional. Black children's low use of services was not due to lesser need. Black and white children also have similar rates of severe episodes that resulted in psychiatric hospitalization or emergency visits.

How could the above be improved?

- Identify what's wrong
- Rewrite better

Group #2 – Children and Families

Before:

Mental illness in parents presents a risk for children. When both parents are mentally ill, children have a greater chance of developing a mental illness themselves. An inconsistent, unpredictable family environment also contributes to mental illness in children. A parent's mental illness can put stress on his or her marriage and affect the couple's parenting abilities, which can, in turn, affect the child's mental health. Parents need treatment, not just for their own sake, but for their children's. Research shows that when parents with mental illness recover, their children's symptoms improve.

How could the above be improved?

- Identify what's wrong
- Rewrite better

Group #3 – Multigenerational Approaches

Before:

Because family adversity can profoundly impede a child's growth and development, the best way to help children is often to help their parents. Taking a two-generation approach has proven to be one of the most effective ways we know of to break the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage. Decades of research show home visiting programs improve newborn and maternal health, increase school readiness, boost school performance, prevent maltreatment, reduce high-risk behavior among adolescents, and help families become more economically self-sufficient. These programs change the trajectory of children's lives and put an end to intergenerational poverty, violence, and abuse.

How could the above be improved?

- Identify what's wrong
- Rewrite better

Group #1 – Disparities

Identify what's wrong

- These data are unframed, and therefore vulnerable to the interpretation that Black and Latino children themselves, (or by extension their parents/ larger cultural identity groups) are to blame for their poor outcomes.
- Avoid reiterating misunderstandings that you want to correct. (This has the unintended effect of making them even more memorable!)

Rewrite better:

All children, regardless of race, experience mental health problems at similar rates. However, access to mental health care is not equally available to children in all places and from all backgrounds. As a result, white children access mental health treatment and preventative care at different rates than Black and Latino children. For example, white children are much more likely to see psychiatrists than Black or Latino children. Black children saw psychiatrists at about one-third (37 percent) the rate of white children, and Latino children saw them at about one-half (49 percent) the rate of white children. Disparities in access to care lead to disparities in outcomes later in life. We can address these disparities by making sure that health resources flow evenly through all communities; doing so will help all young people reach their full potential.

Group #2 – Children and Families

Identify what's wrong

- This communication is likely to cue a sense of determinism – the belief that mental illness in parents leads to mental illness in children, and so on through the generations, which leaves audiences with little hope of positive change.

Rewrite better

The mental health of parents and caregivers is closely linked to the mental health of children. This is one reason why the prevention and early treatment of mental health problems for all age groups is so important. Research shows that when parents affected by mental health challenges recover, their children's symptoms and outcomes improve as well. Supporting adult mental health will alleviate marital stress, enhance parenting abilities, and create consistent, predictable home environments that contribute to the psychiatric wellness of families and communities

Group #3 – Multigenerational Approaches

Identify what's wrong

- Phrases like “intergenerational cycle” are deterministic. In other words, they seem to describe inescapable doom. Focusing on a “vicious cycle” may cause audiences to think, “Why bother?” which is an unfortunate set-up for the needed solutions that are described in the following sentence
- FrameWorks’ research on public thinking about human services finds that the assumption that people should be self-sufficient can backfire. Instead of focusing public thinking about the goals of supports, it reinforces the assumption that supports should be temporary and only provide the most basic necessities.

Rewrite better

The mental health of parents and caregivers is closely linked to the mental health of children. This is one reason why the prevention and early treatment of mental health problems for all age groups is so important. Research shows that when parents affected by mental illness recover, their children’s symptoms and outcomes improve as well. Supporting adult mental health will alleviate marital stress, enhance parenting abilities, and create consistent, predictable home environments that contribute to the psychiatric wellness of families and communities.



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Questions?

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