Framing COVID-19

Topic #4: The power of how during the pandemic

This moment demands an effective public health response. We need accurate data to predict and prevent severe outbreaks. We need to use evidence to inform action and conduct research to develop solutions. And we need to help the public stay informed and engaged.

But the phrase "public health response" is not well understood. Most people equate health with health care. They picture doctors and nurses acting after people are sick or injured. This limits support for public health: the work that happens before people get sick—and work that happens at a wide scale.

Here are three ways we can make a powerful case for the public health work that is always essential—but especially vital for addressing COVID-19.

1. Explain what's happening and what needs to change

We need to unpack mechanisms, not just issue mandates. A clear explanation builds trust and support for solutions—while the lack of one can spark resentment and disengagement. And when we don't build understanding, we let misinformation spread.

Make it clear how one thing leads to another. Use cause-and-effect explanations to help people connect the dots between the what and the why.

Instead of "do what we say"

The definition of a non-essential business must be expanded and protocols for essential businesses must be strengthened. Current policies are doing too little to flatten the curve.

Wash your hands with soap for at least twenty seconds.

A pandemic can take a serious toll on mental health. Now is no time to skimp on self-care. Look after your body and mind. Make sure you exercise regularly, take breaks from the news and connect with others.

Try "see how this works"

Today's physical contact drives the levels of infection we'll see in two to three weeks. Now is the time for clearer and stronger business closure policies, to protect our health and our hospitals.

Soap destroys the virus, but we need to wash our hands for twenty seconds for it to work.

Constant news can lead us to feel anxious about things we can’t control. When we take breaks from media and turn toward things we enjoy, we give our stress response a vital rest.
2. Show how the actions we need people to take are happening and are working

Our perceptions of what other people are—or are not—doing matter enormously. We are more likely to follow guidance when reminded that actions are widely shared and "already happening." Stories about "bad behavior" can work in the opposite way: they give us the impression that others aren't following guidance, and weaken the resolve for collective action.

Whenever possible, emphasize that recommended changes are becoming normal and widespread.

**Instead of dramatizing the behavior you're looking to minimize**

"For mitigation measures to work we need everyone to play their part. People need to stay physically distant and take precautions. Our government needs to take action to slow the spread and speed up the response. But too many people are making dangerous, selfish choices—from teenagers throwing backyard parties to policymakers avoiding the real issues."

**Try highlighting all that we're doing now and explaining why it matters**

"We're coming together by staying apart—and it's working. The quiet in our streets is the sound of an incredible national effort to keep our physical distance. We're playing our part in something bigger, slowing the spread of the virus. We're saving lives and protecting our healthcare system—and we're sending a message to our leaders that we need them to act too."

3. Expand the public's picture of who works in health

A narrow focus on doctors and nurses can keep us from seeing the full range of health responses we need. Include those working behind the scenes, in agencies and labs, inspecting and protecting public health. This helps people to understand and support other aspects of a robust public response, like funding, supply distribution, and data-gathering.

**Instead of starting and ending with hospital-based staff**

"Our thanks goes out to all those in the medical ranks who are caring for those stricken by COVID-19: from the nurses and doctors pulling double shifts in the emergency room, to intensive-care staff making superhuman efforts to keep struggling patients alive, to the desk staff, maintenance crews, and food service workers who keep the hospital running."

**Talk about the range of skilled professions that protect public health**

"All kinds of people are playing a part in keeping us safe right now. The doctors, nurses, and hospital workers who are caring for people with COVID-19. Lab technicians screening samples. Researchers figuring out the quickest way to conduct safe treatment trials. Analysts working out what's going on and how we can best respond."
**About this series**

In this uniquely challenging moment, we need to connect people to the bigger picture. We need ways to explain health, enhance community, and offer hope.

We're pulling guidance from twenty years of framing research and practice to help advocates and experts be heard and understood in a time of global crisis. Every few days, we'll share a few ideas that can help us all amplify the values of justice, inclusion, and interdependence.

To suggest topics, share ideas, or ask questions, talk to @FrameWorksInst on Twitter. You can review previous topics or share the sign-up link with a friend.