Framing COVID-19
Topic #7: Talking about the importance of prevention

There are actions we need to take now to prevent and reduce future harm from the pandemic, but thinking and acting in this way is genuinely difficult. When it comes to society's big challenges, we often struggle to act together before it's too late.

There are reasons for this. We have a built-in tendency to assume that things will continue as they are—even when the norm has been disrupted. We also prefer rewards now over delayed benefits—even if the prize is bigger later. We default to focusing on the here and now, though we all have the desire to leave a positive legacy for the future.

We all need help to think preventatively. This is vital to achieve the action we need right now—and to help us design a better future as we come through this moment.

Here are three ways to spark a preventative mindset.

1. **Clearly connect what we do now to what it leads to later**

   Communications need to overcome our tendency *not* to link now and later. It is crucial that we explain clearly and succinctly how today's actions lead to tomorrow's consequences. We need to explicitly connect action now to what is avoided later.

   The results of prevention are abstract and absent: problems that didn't happen. That makes it all the more important to talk about current actions in concrete, relatable terms—and to speak clearly and directly. Tell stories about what prevention policies, practices, and programs look like; how they work; and what they can do. Give examples.

   **Instead of relying on expert, insider jargon**

   "Two out of three small businesses didn't meet their rental obligations in April. This trend will affect not only real estate companies but the global financial system, as we saw in the 2008 economic crisis. A comprehensive, upstream housing and rental market stabilization package is urgently needed to prevent the worst from happening. Mortgage forbearance, rent cancellations, and moratoriums on evictions and foreclosures—for both the private and business real estate markets—are essential."

   **Help people understand how we can head off a shared problem**

   "Many people who have lost wages, jobs, or customers aren't able to pay their rent or mortgages. We can't restart our economy if there are empty businesses where our jobs used to be. We can't revive our communities if people have been forced to leave their homes. But if we act now, we can protect our communities so that there is less to rebuild. We need government to act quickly and channel resources to prevent evictions and foreclosures."
2. Make prevention society's shared responsibility

When people do think about prevention, they tend to picture wise choices by individuals: the disciplined jogger warding off heart disease and diabetes. We need to bring preventative policies into view, showing how smart public policy and creative programming improve conditions in a big way.

**Instead of starting and ending with prevention as self-care**

"This uncertain time has added new stresses to all of our lives. During the pandemic it's more important than ever to take care of your mental health. When you learn ways to manage stress, you can prevent serious issues like depression or anxiety from taking hold. Connecting with others is one of the best ways to stave off feelings of loneliness or isolation. Fortunately, technology can help us all stay close while remaining apart. Call your loved ones often. Consider using a video-chat platform so you can see their faces."

**Help people think about public, not just personal action**

"During this uncertain time, we're all doing our best to connect. For many of us, technology is helping us look after ourselves and each other. This time calls us to expand the use of technology so that mental health professionals can provide support to everyone who needs it. Having this flexibility means providers can help more people cope with the stress, financial worries, and isolation that the pandemic brings. Without these changes, we are likely to see an increase in depression, suicide, family violence, and lasting trauma."

3. Explain the potential for future harm without dwelling on it

When we paint too vivid a picture of impending doom, we can lead people to disbelieve it or conclude nothing can be done to prevent it. They either tune out or turn inward, tending to their own security.

We need to inspire urgent action and foster a farsighted, generous response. Balance "we can see a problem ahead" with "there's a way to steer around it."

**Instead of focusing only on how bad it will get**

"The pandemic has created the conditions for a massive rise in rates of child abuse. We've seen this before during stressful times. During the 2008 recession, pediatricians reported a steep rise in infant injuries and deaths from abusive head trauma, a trend that lingered for years after the economy recovered. The recent spike in abuse will only grow exponentially and reverberate for years to come if our government does not take action now."

**Explain the factors that increase—and reduce—the potential for harm**

"The conditions our society is experiencing increase the risk of child abuse. Severe and persistent stress wear down our ability to manage emotions. This helps to explain why financial burdens across society have contributed to a rise in child abuse in the past. But we know that removing stressors from families and adding supports makes a huge difference quickly. Providing financial assistance and stepping up social services will mean fewer people are affected by stress and violence."

These strategies are adapted from Six Ways to Boost Public Support for Prevention-Based Policy.