



A Systemic View of Food and Fitness
Findings from Simplifying Models Research

A FrameWorks Research Report

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BACKGROUND

One of the clear obstacles to progress on fitness-related policy interventions is the American public's patterns of reasoning on these issues. Research conducted for the FrameWorks Institute has confirmed that there is low awareness of systemic factors that contribute to health problems such as obesity, high cholesterol and diabetes. Insiders on the issue know that environmental effects on health and fitness are substantial – from the availability of healthy foods in a given community, to the opportunities for (safe) outdoor recreation. Insiders are also aware that, in principle, these systemic factors can be addressed, and health problems alleviated through the creation of safer environments for walking, expansion of opportunities for physical activity in a given neighborhood, and the promotion of healthier food supplies in particular communities, among others.

But these changes are only likely if Americans begin to engage more actively and productively in collective responses to these issues.

Doctors and other health advocates have effectively made the case that particular kinds of *behaviors* affect health and fitness. Partially as a result of this success, the public discourse about health and fitness plays out in very individualistic terms, emphasizing personal responsibility and creating a very limited role for policy (essentially reduced to education and exhortation). Until and unless advocates convince the public that contexts and environments play an important causal role, most interventions contemplated by experts will make little sense.

Raising awareness of the systemic dimensions of fitness, and the role for policy in achieving it, involves more than publicizing facts. The cognitive and cultural obstacles to thinking about fitness in a systemic way are significant and deeply entrenched. Overcoming these stubborn cognitive and cultural patterns, and promoting new ways of thinking, is a challenging undertaking that requires empirically-based strategies and tools of communication.

The work reported in this paper is aimed at developing one of these tools – a “simplifying model” that helps average Americans think about the issue of fitness, and related interventions, in a more productive way. A simplifying model is a brief, user-friendly explanation that can help average people grasp some key aspects of an issue, and adopt a perspective closer to that held by experts. There is a long history in the cognitive sciences of the development and use of this kind of metaphorical model to help people understand abstract concepts. This approach has been demonstrated to be helpful in earlier FrameWorks projects on topics from global warming to early childhood to rural development – helping to clarify and reinforce other elements in an overall communications strategy. The research conducted for this topic strongly suggests that this frame element can make an important contribution on the topic of food and fitness as well.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Obstacles

Americans typically do not think of fitness as a domain for intervention or collective action because of two closely related and reinforcing patterns in their thinking about the topic:

- Thinking about Fitness, including thoughts about food and exercise, is strongly associated with the “Little Picture” of home, personal routines and other aspects of our immediate surroundings.
- Thinking about why people are fit focuses strongly on a “Mentalist” perspective – which concerns choices, character, willpower, etc. – as opposed to a “Materialist” perspective, which would include concrete factors such as the availability of particular foods or opportunities for activity.

These ways of thinking about fitness are nearly mutually exclusive with an *ecological* perspective – one that takes into account both concrete conditions and conditions beyond the immediate and individually-controlled. Put simply, it is cognitively natural to think *either* in ecological terms *or* in mentalist/individualist terms.

Any effective explanatory message must help people get past these stubborn and counterproductive patterns, and (therefore) to shift them into an ecological/systemic perspective.

Method

The project involved development of brief explanatory messages (“simplifying models”), and “TalkBack” testing with over 300 subjects. TalkBack testing includes a variety of techniques where subjects see or hear a brief message (typically a single paragraph) and are asked to interpret, repeat, respond to and discuss the material. The goal is to determine whether a given message can be understood, remembered and passed along – and whether it leads to a useful shift in perspective.

Recommended Explanatory Approach

Previous FrameWorks research suggested, and the initial testing in the current round of research confirmed, that the most productive messages center on the idea of a “Food And Fitness Environment” (FFE). Indeed, of the numerous messages it might be worth “teaching” Americans about fitness -- from what a calorie is to aspects of how the food industry operate -- those that perform best are those that express the following causal idea:

Specific, concrete factors in a given place create an environment that affects our level of fitness.

While most Americans can agree that our environment plays some role in determining our health and fitness, this understanding is vague, compared with the dominant (Little-Picture, Mentalist)

model of individual choice. For instance, the systemic view scarcely surfaced in the 50-minute, free-ranging elicitations on fitness. The recommended model, though, succeeds in helping average Americans focus on the systemic perspective.

There are several key elements to this model that make it an effective starting point for communications about fitness:

- It crystallizes the environment and its causal effects on fitness as a new *thing* that people can focus on.
- It broadens the topic beyond the Little Picture of home, family and personal routines.
- It promotes a Materialist perspective in several ways – by rooting the FFE in a particular *place*; by referring to particular *causal factors*; by focusing on *access* to concrete things in the environment; and by suggesting that the environment can be objectively *evaluated*.

The following is an example of a single sentence that helps people focus on a systemic perspective:

Doctors say that every town, workplace or neighborhood in America can be evaluated in terms of what they call its "Food And Fitness Environment."

And the following is an example of a paragraph that more fully expresses the model:

Doctors say that every town, workplace and neighborhood in America can be evaluated in terms of what they call its Food And Fitness Environment. The Food And Fitness Environment where we live or work is one of the most important things determining whether we end up fit and healthy or not. Some factors in the Food And Fitness Environment are fairly obvious, like access to pollution-free air, healthy food and adequate health care. The number of walking paths or fast food restaurants in an area also affects the overall state of public fitness. When we improve the Food And Fitness Environment of a place, the health of the people who live and work there improves as well.

Subjects exposed to this kind of language stayed focused on systemic factors that cause fitness outcomes, and were able to generate their own examples of relevant factors in the environment. Their discussion was strikingly different from (and more constructive than) the discussions of participants in the open-ended elicitations.

Importantly, people exposed to the model consistently assigned responsibility for improving fitness outcomes to decision-makers (in governments, workplaces and communities) as opposed to focusing on individual choice.

Despite the fact that the topics of “food” and “fitness” are, by default, associated strongly with Mentalist, Little-Picture patterns of thinking, references to them in this context are compatible with an entirely different way of looking at the issue. Mentioning food and fitness in the context

of the model helps people think about a particular set of conditions that define the places where we live and work.

In addition to exploration of the recommended approach, the paper discusses alternative language and explanatory directions that were considered during the project, including comparison with two “control” directions included in testing.

METHODS

The process of simplifying models development involves iterative stages of analysis and empirical testing, resulting in continuous winnowing and refinement of hypotheses. The assessment of a model’s effectiveness begins with qualitative testing (see the discussion of “TalkBack” below), but within the larger FrameWorks approach, models are often subjected to quantitative testing in survey research, to confirm their ability to support and extend values and other frame elements.

Generating Directions

The initial stages of the project involved an effort to identify a variety of potential avenues for analysis and testing. These ideas were generated partly through review of materials produced by experts and advocates in the field, and discussion with colleagues. This stage of simplifying models development resulted in a list of potential explanatory directions that were later evaluated and/or tested with members of the public. Testing, described below, took place between November 2006 and February 2007.

TalkBack Testing

TalkBack testing is an approach that includes a number of different specific techniques, all aimed at assessing candidate models on two basic criteria:

Do they have the potential to enter public discourse?

Do they have positive impacts on thinking?

In either formal or conversational settings, subjects are presented with “candidate” simplifying models, and then their subsequent understandings and ability to express the models are evaluated in a variety of ways. For example, some models were evaluated by how well subjects could apply the ideas to their own experience, others by analyzing the kinds of solutions people would propose after being exposed to the model.

Subjects

In all, more than 300 subjects from around the US participated in this phase of the project. This group did not represent a specific segment of the population, but was instead designed to be a diverse cross-section in terms of occupation, education level, age, gender, geography and political orientation. Over 140 people took part in one-on-one phone conversations. Another 140 subjects took part in on-line, written TalkBack. Roughly 30 participated in “TalkBack chains,” described below.

Stimulus

Whether in phone interviews or on-line written surveys, the material for TalkBack testing consisted of very short texts (roughly 80-120 words) about some topic related to understanding environmental effects on health, e.g.,

Doctors say that every town, workplace and neighborhood in America can be evaluated in terms of what they call its Food And Fitness Assets. The Food And Fitness Assets of where we live or work have huge effects on whether we end up fit and healthy or not. Some Food And Fitness Assets are fairly obvious, like access to pollution-free air, healthy food and adequate health care. But others we are only learning about – like how the number of walking paths or fast food restaurants in an area affects the overall state of public fitness. The Food And Fitness Assets of a place are created through decisions by everyone from city councils, to supermarket managers, to school administrators who plan gym classes.

Following exposure to the paragraphs, subjects are asked to respond in various ways. For instance, they are asked comprehension and policy-related questions such as the following:

- *Could you name three important food and fitness assets in your own town, workplace or neighborhood? How about some deficits?*
- *Why is this information important?*
- *What can be done to improve things where you live?*

Subjects were also asked to repeat as much as they could remember about the paragraphs they heard, usually after answering two or three intervening questions. Subjects’ ability to remember and express a simplifying model is the key criteria of its effectiveness. Others include:

- Subjects’ ability to use the model in ordinary conversation, drawing new inferences beyond what they have specifically been told
- Their tendency to “stay on track,” rather than digressing to other topics
- Most obviously, their tendency to engage in productive thinking about the topic, and to avoid common counterproductive patterns.

TalkBack Chains

The most distinctive technique of TalkBack testing is “TalkBack Chains,” which resemble the child’s game of “Telephone” (or “Gossip,” in some parts of the country). This approach aims at assessing the capacity of a model to enter public discourse, and the likely ways it will be distorted over time. In the TalkBack Chain methodology, subjects are presented with a paragraph as described above, and asked simply to pass the information along to other subjects as faithfully as possible. After they have explained the information, the “teachers” exit and new “students” are brought in; the chain continues for up to eight or nine “generations.”

Initial presentation → 1st generation TalkBack → 2nd generation TalkBack
→ 3rd generation TalkBack → 4th generation TalkBack → ...

Researchers provide no input after the initial presentation. Subjects are not allowed to take notes, so any information that is passed along must be remembered and internalized, at least to the degree that it can be explained during the brief “training” session.

TalkBack chains represent a surprisingly difficult test for any candidate message. As each generation of subjects is exposed to the material, participants have strong tendencies to distort the information (typically in the direction of previously familiar ideas), and to introduce unwanted elements, or simply to forget what they have heard. The chains provide a severe test of the clarity and durability of an explanatory message. By assessing subjects’ acceptance of and facility with different models – as they try to explain and reason about the issue – we can make predictions about how effectively particular messages will be absorbed and used once they are disseminated to the public.

The strongest explanatory models show some ability to self-correct – i.e., subjects can end up arriving back at something close to the original formulation, even if they themselves heard a somewhat distorted version.

TWO KEY OBSTACLES

Previous phases of this project have established that powerful, default patterns of thinking among average Americans interfere with productive engagement on the issue of fitness.

In the elicitations – free-ranging discussions of health, nutrition and fitness, lasting roughly 50 minutes – subjects almost never expressed systemic views of fitness, except to acknowledge a vague sense that modern living is less healthy than it used to be. Overall, elicitation subjects made only occasional references to “external” factors that might influence fitness outcomes.

These default patterns of thinking are unproductive in our view because they prevent people from taking an ecological perspective on fitness – one that takes into account concrete, physical factors and that considers elements that go beyond the sphere of individual responsibility. Indeed, the elicitations showed, and the initial round of simplifying models research confirmed, that in general people are able to think *either* in ecological terms *or* in mentalist/individualist terms.

In this section, we review two critical dimensions of people’s dominant, counterproductive patterns of thinking about fitness, because these represent serious obstacles that the simplifying model should help to overcome.

Getting past “Little-Picture Thinking”

Thinking about fitness is typically limited to the narrow, personal realm that might be thought of as a Little Picture perspective. Americans understand that nutrition and exercise have a tremendous impact on people’s state of health. But thinking about both of these topics is strongly rooted in thinking about home, family, and personal routines.

While one goal of the project is to help people understand the *environmental* factors that influence fitness, it is important to note that even the idea of *environment* can be interpreted in Little-Picture terms. There is a strong tendency to think about “little environments” that are familiar, including:

- the little social environment of friends, role models and social circle;
- the little cultural environment of a person’s upbringing and family;
- the little physical environment of one’s home or workspace; and
- the little consumer environment of familiar stores and restaurants.

It is in these little environments where thinking about food and fitness is usually rooted. Here are two typical examples of a default interpretation of what “environment” means in the fitness context:

If your friends or family are into fitness and healthy eating, you will be more likely to do the same.

Illinois woman in her 50's¹

If we are raised in a home that puts value on eating well and getting exercise, we are more likely to carry on with these habits as we age.

Missouri woman in her 20's

When the topic is considered in terms of these little environments – as it is for most Americans, most of the time – there is no logical connection to public policy or public responsibility.

(As will be discussed later in the report, it is possible to define “environments” in a way that promotes very different, broader, and more systemic patterns of thinking.)

Getting past “Mentalist Thinking”

Another dimension of the default patterns is that they are “Mentalist” – as opposed to a “Materialist” – in nature. That is, they focus on the mental realm – which relates to people’s *choices, knowledge, character*, and so forth, as opposed to the “material,” contextual factors that influence outcomes (store and restaurant offerings, city design, etc.).

The earlier research showed, and the TalkBack testing confirms, that given the slightest opportunity, people default to Mentalist takes on the topic.

As the earlier quotes illustrate, a term like “environment” is compatible with Mentalist thinking, just as it is compatible with Little-Picture thinking. (Such is the power of these default patterns of seeing the world!) The “environment” can easily refer to the *examples* set by people around us, for instance.

If you [are] in an environment that people focus on being healthy you will try to be positive in keeping on a well balanced diet, and if you don't have any positive influence in your life it will be hard to follow through.

New York woman, age 41

A major problem with the Mentalist perspective is that, short of outlawing bad behavior, the only sensible way to change things for the better is to educate people or exhort them to make better choices. When asked about what can be done, people who are using the Mentalist perspective answer in terms of education and making better choices:

[What's needed is] better education of the people, especially in the workplace. Heeding your doctor's advice, which unfortunately I do not do. And just trying to eat healthy.

Massachusetts man, age 60

¹ Note: Some testing subjects, particularly in the online context, preferred to indicate an approximate range rather than a specific age.

While education will always be an important part of any successful public health initiative, the idea of education unfortunately “drowns out” all other potential interventions.

The bottom line is that by far the most natural way for people to think about fitness is in Little-Picture and Mentalist terms, and it is very easy for messages to inadvertently trigger and reinforce these counterproductive patterns of thinking.

Each of the recommended directions discussed in this report helps with one or both of these (related but distinct) challenges.

RECOMMENDED APPROACH

In this section we discuss the approach that was best able to promote a new and more productive kind of conversation about fitness.

Key proposition

An important part of any simplifying models project is identifying messages that are both *important* to teach (i.e. because they lead to helpful implications), and *possible* to teach using language that can be tested.

There are a wide variety of different things it might be important to “teach” average Americans about the realities of fitness. Here are a few of the many possible focuses of an explanatory message:

The food industry caters to cravings for foods that make us unhealthy when consumed in large quantities (foods with too much fat, sugar, etc.).

Advertising is a strong causal force in determining overall fitness.

Current American work and living patterns are too sedentary to allow for adequate exercise.

The overall level of fitness in the country is something that can and should be addressed through policy.

Fitness can be thought of in terms of the balance between caloric intake and calorie-burning activity.

A prime reason for Americans’ low fitness levels is the difference between modern and traditional/evolutionary lifestyles.

The list could be lengthened considerably, based on both additional factors and different choices about focus, or level of specificity.

On the topic of fitness, the most effective approach proved to be a focus on the idea of a “Food And Fitness Environment,” and on the following causal idea:

Specific, concrete factors in a given place create an environment that affects our level of fitness.

A central idea here is that it is helpful to frame a diverse set of concrete and abstract conditions – such as the kinds of businesses that operate in a given community – as though they added up to something like *a physical environment* that surrounds us.

When people grasp this key point, they shift from the dominant Little-Picture, Mentalist view of fitness to a systemic perspective where policy interventions make sense. It is a concept that can be expressed in a way that average people can easily understand, remember and repeat (see

below for discussion of *how* best to express the point), and that effectively sets the stage for a very different and more productive conversation about collective approaches to improving fitness.

Sample Paragraph

The following is a sample paragraph (broken down by sentences) that effectively conveys the proposition, and proved successful in TalkBack testing.

[Introduction of key topic and term:]	Doctors say that every town, workplace and neighborhood in America can be evaluated in terms of what they call its Food And Fitness Environment.
[Statement of key proposition:]	The Food And Fitness Environment where we live or work is one of the most important things determining whether we end up fit and healthy or not.
[Examples]	Some factors in the Food And Fitness Environment are fairly obvious, like access to pollution-free air, healthy food and adequate health care. The number of walking paths or fast food restaurants in an area also affects the overall state of public fitness.
[Action implications]	When we improve the Food And Fitness Environment of a place, the health of the people who live and work there improves as well.

Note that this is just an example of how the model can be expressed. Communicators can make a variety of other choices while conveying the same core idea, as long as they maintain a focus on the right perspectives, carefully avoid various traps, and use the idea as a central organizing point.

To aid communicators in understanding and using the Food and Fitness Environment model, we devote the rest of this section to discussion of the model's key aspects, and of important considerations in expressing it well.

Key conceptual elements

There are a number of components to the central message that make it effective in establishing a new perspective.

“Reifying” the idea – Creating a new “thing” to think about

One of the key effects of the model is to crystallize the environment and its causal effects on fitness as a new *thing* that people can focus on.

The FFE model is a subtle metaphor that treats a set of concrete and abstract conditions as though they added up to a coherent, physical environment that we live or work in.

It is a matter of common sense, and also a principle supported by cognitive science, that people can more easily focus on a topic when they can think of it as a distinct *thing*. While average Americans can agree in a vague way that fitness isn't solely determined by individual choice and character, the idea is not sufficiently concrete to serve as an organizing idea. (This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the idea came up hardly at all in a series of twenty in-depth, open-ended interviews on the topic.)

Once this “thing” has reality in people’s minds, it makes sense that it can be evaluated, tracked, managed, etc. Until it has been crystallized in this way, those notions make little sense.

The TalkBack subjects below seem to have accepted the concept of Food and Fitness Environment as a distinct thing that causes important effects.

Economists suggest that a person's Food and Fitness Environment affects our lives in important ways. Things like fast food restaurants, walking or biking paths and so on create environments that promote either healthy or unhealthy lifestyles.

Connecticut woman, age 22

Food and fitness and factors² are a major contributor to the health of community [or] work place . . . When all these factors exist the entire community is a healthier, more productive place to be.

Pennsylvania woman, age 44

Many messages from advocates on this issue refer to environmental effects, of course, but usually without adequately crystallizing the environment as a concrete “thing” (or set of things) that can be focused on productively.

“Food and fitness”

The research quickly established that it is helpful to mention both food and fitness immediately, in order to clarify the topic/category that we were trying to convey.

People have a strong tendency to think first about exercise when they hear the word “fitness” alone. But a mention of both, at least in the context of the model, seems to suggest a coherent set of considerations that all work together.

Q: Could you name a couple of factors in the Food And Fitness Environment where you live?

² Some TalkBack subjects saw or heard a paragraph nearly identical to the one above, but which emphasized the term Food and Fitness *Factors*. Both phrases proved effective as “verbal hooks” for the concept. We recommend the use of “Food and Fitness Environment” as a label that will be repeated and reinforced, because it is a more direct and holistic reference to the central concept. We recommend use of the word “factors” in the prose that explains what the FFE is.

A: *We have walking trails. We have a couple of ski slopes near us. We have many farmers markets. Community gardens...*

Woman in New York, age 40

It is important to acknowledge that research conducted for this project has shown that the terms “food” and “fitness” ordinarily trigger thinking that is locked into Little Picture and Mentalist patterns. But in the context of this new perspective on the topic, the terms serve simply to clarify the topic, without promoting this kind of counterproductive thinking. In the context of a conceptual picture of an *environment*, the words do not end up evoking images of individual choice about diet and exercise.

“Factors”

Factor is a simple concept (and common term) that proved particularly effective in the context of this model.

It helps focus the concept – factors are understood as particular things in the environment that can be pointed to and listed – and to help establish a Materialist perspective. There are concrete aspects of our surroundings that are affecting our fitness.

Importantly, the “factors” are easily understood as creating a *causal* relationship between our environment and our fitness.

We are influenced greatly by our surroundings. If we live in a place with lots of fast food, then that will be an option that we choose more often. If we live or work in a place that has walking paths, we will walk. If there is clean air, we will breathe better.

New York woman in her 30’s

The idea of Factors also seems to suggest things that are particular and manageable, rather than infinite or overwhelming (as general problem descriptions of social issues often are). For instance, the woman below generated a healthy list of manageable, practical proposals including the two below:

The community has to stand behind making great sidewalks for people to be able to walk on. Walking is free, so people who can’t afford a gym membership should still have access to wide sidewalks where they can walk, free of any danger of cars. The government can provide the schools with the amount of budget necessary to provide for physical education classes, and not keep cutting them out of school.

Arizona woman in her 40’s

The idea of distinct factors also creates the sense of a “list” that can be added to – i.e. as we think of new factors we had not recognized before, such the presence of fast food restaurants. As this woman thinks about how the environment affects physical activity, she generates a list herself:

Depending on what neighborhood you live in, those options are laid out for you and you have to work within them- open space, room for walking, hospitality to bikers, trails, safety features for walkers, and food options... they are very influential

Washington woman in her 40's

Place

The most effective paragraphs defined environments in terms of *places* like “neighborhood, town or workplace.” This idea was easily grasped by TalkBack subjects.

According to doctors, the Food And Fitness Environment can be measured in any given town or city. The food and fitness environment is made up of factors such as health services, availability of parks, number of fast food places, etc

California woman, age 47

Doctors say that the Food And Fitness Environment of every neighborhood, city and state can be improved. The quality of life is dependent upon healthy food, a pollution free environment, walk paths and placement of fast food restaurants.

Woman in her 50's

The focus on *place* has several beneficial effects:

- It *broadens* the topic beyond the Little-Picture environments of home, social circle and micro-culture. This issue is not just about your *immediate* surroundings, which you take personal responsibility for, but about larger environments, which can only be improved via decisions on a broader level.
- It helps make sense of the idea of *intervention*. Places, unlike individual choice and character, are managed and are subject to decision-making.
- It helps establish a *Materialist* perspective. The environment of a *place* is concrete and objective. It limits or enables actions in clear ways. This focus on place makes it more difficult to reduce the issue to questions of individual choice and character.
- It reinforces the idea that you can *evaluate and compare* fitness conditions. It is cognitively natural to think about the very real differences between places. (See below for further discussion of the evaluation point.)

Access/availability

One of the most important concepts that focuses people's thinking on environmental effects is the idea of Access.

Common default understandings focus on people’s bad habits, for instance. But the idea of Access takes the focus away from individuals and puts it onto context. When the idea of Access is at the center, questions about individual character and choice do not come up as naturally.

Q: What does Food And Fitness Environment mean?

A: Just basically what we have access to in our environment, like places to exercise or to be fit – and our access to food.

Woman in Illinois, age 24

Doctors say that we need to be concerned about our Food And Fitness Environment in our cities and communities and things like having access to pollution-free air and good food sources and exercise sources.

Woman in Rhode Island, age 63

“Access” and “availability” are terms that show up with remarkable consistency in the data. They seem to be an important way that Americans mark the distinction between the idea of free individualism, and the idea of external effects and choices that are limited by the environment.

Subjects who heard paragraphs like the one above understood that the way to address the problem is not just through education or personal effort, but by improving the shared environment for the better.

If they would build more areas where families could exercise – either indoor or outdoor, and probably have more organic food stores, or Whole Foods, something like that.

Texas woman, age 41

An idea closely related to Access – and which was also helpful in TalkBack testing – is the *number* of something like bike paths in the environment. References to *number* not only speak to the availability of things, but reinforce a concrete, materialist perspective, and the notions of *evaluation* and *measurement* (see below).

Evaluation

The idea that places can be *evaluated* in terms of their effects on fitness – that there are particular yardsticks we can apply – helps make the idea more concrete, and also sets up a need for responsible management. If we can evaluate, then maybe we can also improve.

After hearing the paragraph, the subject below spoke in quantifiable terms about the food and fitness factors in his area.

The amount of fast food restaurants, walking paths and quality of air we breathe.

North Carolina man, age 28

The following subject, responding to a somewhat different paragraph (see discussion of Fitness Score below) is able to stay focused on things that can be measured and, in principle, managed through policymaking.

Every town, environment, and workplace has a fitness score. The fitness score is determined by a number of variables, including access to healthcare, clean air and healthy food.

Woman in her 20's

“Doctors”

Finally, the use of doctors as the messengers in this context helps establish both that trusted experts believe in the importance of the concept, and that a Materialist perspective is appropriate. Doctors focus on the *body* – including its physical state and the physical factors that affect it.³

Doctors have found that food and fitness factors can affect the health of a community.

Arizona man, age 36

The proposition alone

Together, the elements we have just discussed effectively create a new conceptual starting point for people's consideration of fitness. As the quotes above illustrate, TalkBack subjects were able to understand, remember and repeat the key ideas of the message.

It is worth noting that a single sentence can achieve some of these effects, if it has the right content and focus. Eight of the TalkBack subjects were provided only with this sentence:

Doctors say that every town, workplace or neighborhood in America can be evaluated in terms of what they call its "Food And Fitness Environment."

They were then asked to speculate about what the “Food And Fitness Environment” might mean; 7 of these 8 referred to the availability or accessibility of physical fitness opportunities.

³ All the tested paragraphs attributed the ideas to some validating authority (economists, “experts,” etc.) This aspect of the paragraphs was not treated as central to the testing, since it is not integral to the explanatory model per se. But in the end, responses to the successful messages suggested that doctors were an effective and logical messenger for the message.

The variety and types of physical fitness activities that are available for people to engage in. Because the word "environment" is being used, I would presume that "availability" (as opposed to "usage") is the key measure.

California man, age 30

6 of 8 included a reference to the types of food or food establishments available.

The type, quality, and quantity of food that is readily available to the general public, such as in stores, markets, restaurants, etc.

California woman, age 48

In short, while communicators will not typically try to make their point in a single sentence, it is possible to accomplish some of the important communications goals discussed in this section in a very brief text. This single sentence:

- Associates the issue with particular *places*
- “Reifies” the FFE as a “thing” to be focused on
- Introduces “food and fitness” as a single, coherent category
- Sets up doctors as trusted messengers (focused on material conditions)
- Sets up the idea of evaluation and comparison

Extrapolating from the model

One indication that a simplifying model is working well for people is when they are able to appropriately expand on the basic idea. TalkBack testing showed that this is the case for the “food and fitness environment” model.

Collective Responsibility

Most of the tested paragraphs said little about whose responsibility it is to improve the food and fitness environment. Nevertheless, when asked about potential solutions, subjects consistently thought about how to respond *collectively* to the problem (one of the most important factors in creating a new kind of conversation about the issue).

The following seven subjects – each of whom heard a paragraph that did not refer to responsibility – were all asked who they thought was responsible for making improvements to the situation. Remarkably, they were unanimous in calling for collective approaches rather than individual responsibility:

Q: Who do you think is responsible for making these improvements?

A: The government.

Pennsylvania woman, age 27

It has to be a three-part effort. Not only the government and the general public, but also private business can help in doing that too.

Texas man, age 29

Everybody.

Louisiana woman, age 51

I think the whole community as well as the local government, of course, too. Everybody.

Wyoming woman, age 63

I think that neighborhood groups could do a lot. I think that if people could get together with the PTA, the neighborhood watch groups, and those types of groups that are already in place, and work their aldermen—I think something like that could be possible.

Missouri woman, age 32

I think the public in general—that's where it starts.

Louisiana woman, age 29

I think that it would be a joint effort between the parents as well as the school, which is the other place where kids would primarily spend their time.

Michigan woman, age 24

Interestingly, when the idea of collective responsibility was expressed *explicitly* as part of the explanatory message (e.g. the FFE “is created through decisions by everyone from city councils, to supermarket managers, to school administrators who plan gym classes”), it was typically *not* remembered or repeated. We speculate that this is because a simplifying model must focus on conveying one, focused point, and the question of responsibility is really closer to an implication – a conclusion that is not a *part of* the explanatory model, but that people successfully draw for themselves.

Additional examples

Many TalkBack subjects volunteered examples beyond the ones which were suggested in the test paragraphs.

- Alternatives to cars

One source of spontaneous examples that people volunteered were possible alternatives to the reliance on cars – including mass transit, as well as making places better for bike-riding or walking in various ways.

Some factors are harder to measure -- such as walkability, which encourages people to stay fit by not using their cars.

Maryland woman in her 30's

It is easy for many people to view “car culture” as one of the negative aspects of our food and fitness environment.

- Number/availability of gyms, recreation centers, etc.

These examples were often volunteered spontaneously and were easily tied to the idea of a Food and Fitness Environment.

[We should have] more gyms within the work place since people work so much of their day, they might now want to go to a gym after work.

North Carolina woman, age 31

A potential liability of this kind of example – and the reason it was not included in test materials – is that these facilities might tend to reinforce the idea of private, “little environments.”

- Security and safety

A number of people volunteered safety concerns as part of a food and fitness environment that keeps people from being more physically active and fit. This applies to urban crime that keeps people indoors, as well as the general sense of insecurity that keeps children from roaming around outdoors.

I think one of the ways they can improve [things] is more community policing, more keeping the neighborhoods safer, for people to get out and walk around, get out and enjoy. You know, enjoy being physically fit rather than driving and sitting on their butts.

Connecticut man, age 26

A model people apply to their own lives

Subjects were able to apply the model to their own lives and their own environments. The following woman was able to apply the model to her own community and discuss a list of relevant food and fitness factors:

We have a town square that has a library, an ice skating rink, a public pool, a playground, and tennis courts all right in the middle. I think that affects the health, because people can have access to walking, [and] to all different kinds of exercise and- and community things right there. The thing that affects it negatively is the number of fast food restaurants that are all located . . . within blocks of each other. And there are no health food restaurants.

Pennsylvania woman, age 44

This is an important strength of the model, since when it comes to engaging with members of the broader public, a question that advocates always have to answer is, “How does this relate to me?”

An example that did not arise – Television and video games

It is worth noting that one source of examples that showed up commonly in elicitations did not show up in environment-based discussions – namely, kids getting fat and unfit from too much television, too many video games and not enough sound parenting.

We consider it an advantage of the model that it seems to move people away from the home environment (where parents are supposed to rule) and to focus their attention on environments beyond the home.

Choice of examples

The examples that appear in the tested language – i.e. the illustrative references to particular factors that influence fitness – are not intended as *the only* examples that communicators must use. The idea of a food and fitness environment (and the factors that make it up) is compatible with a wide range of particular topics that a given advocate or organization might wish to focus on.

That said, the most effective examples follow certain principles:

Diversity: The broader the examples, the clearer it is that there are many important factors that influence fitness, and that the topic is a large one.

Concreteness: Both for clarity, and to help promote a “Materialist” perspective, the examples that are most effective should be as concrete as possible.

Focus: The examples were chosen in order to help people focus on questions related to food and exercise. It is easy for the topic to slip into broader questions of health – e.g. as it relates to pollution, and so forth.

Clear causation: Examples were chosen that would show a clear and obvious causal connection between the particular fixture in the environment and health and fitness outcomes.

With these principles in mind, here is a brief discussion of some of the particular examples used in the testing.

Number of fast-food restaurants

This was an important and effective way of showing people how their food system is an environment that affects them in significant ways.

- It was vivid and understandable.
- Putting it in terms of number reinforces the key idea of *evaluation* and *measurement*.
- For most people, it implied that intervention is possible. (This is a remarkable departure from the way that people usually treat the problem of fast food.)

Access to healthy food

This reference was often repeated, but subjects were more likely to stress the more concrete idea above. This may be because average Americans don't see any problem with their access to food. This kind of example was most effective with subjects who seemed particularly conscious of "healthy food" (like organics or local produce).

Number/availability of walking paths / bike paths / parks

Subjects often repeated these clear and easily understood examples, which have several advantages.

- They are vivid and familiar.
- They are connected in an obvious way to fitness and physical activity.
- They bring to mind a physical, deliberately constructed environment that communities and towns take responsibility for (and that distinguish one community from another).

Access to clean air/water

This is a clear and familiar factor that is easily connected with health. It was easily remembered and repeated in TalkBack. Importantly, even though it is more closely associated with health rather than fitness *per se*, as well as with an environmentalist perspective, it proved to be very compatible with a broader picture, and seemed to effectively open up the topic of environmental effects more generally.

* * * * *

Having explored the most successful strategy in the TalkBack testing, we now turn to a more general overview of the question of which explanatory direction to take.

TESTED DIRECTIONS

Over the course of the project, in both analytical and testing phases, a number of basic explanatory strategies were considered.

In this section, we discuss two directions that do not focus directly on conveying the central idea of an ecological perspective – these are the related notions that the fitness of the population or community matters to all of us, and that we have a shared responsibility for the fitness of others. Both of these approaches are staples of conventional public health communications. Neither proved to be particularly effective in our testing, especially in comparison with more direct efforts to convey an ecological perspective.

We also discuss two “control” directions, taken from advocate communications, neither of which proved to be effective.

Finally, in this section we report on some variants on the ecology direction – alternative ways of expressing the idea of a “food and fitness environment” – that were considered and rejected because judged to be less effective than the recommended language.

Collective Consequences

Another critical point that was considered and explored in the research is the idea that the collective fitness of a community or society *matters* – that it can and should be responsibly *managed*. It is obvious to insiders that the collective state of health affects all of us, our society and our economy, but research has shown that average Americans tend not to appreciate the point. Instead, health and fitness are matters of *personal* concern.

While the idea of collective stakes is a critical point, however, the idea that there are systemic causes is even more basic, and a kind of prerequisite – without it, the idea of intervention makes no sense.

The tested material included several efforts to build in a sense of shared fates. For instance, one tested paragraph contained the following references to economic implications:

Economists say that we can get tremendous economic benefits by improving what experts call the Food And Fitness Environment. The Food And Fitness Environment of a town, neighborhood or workplace has huge effects on whether we end up fit and healthy or not - which then affects overall productivity, healthcare costs and so forth.

Another emphasized that the quality of our food and fitness environments have public health implications:

Doctors say that we can get tremendous public health gains by improving what experts call the Food And Fitness Environment.

None of these attempts were successful in focusing subjects’ attention on collective stakes.

Collective Responsibility

In the default model that guides Americans' everyday thinking, health, nutrition and fitness are the results of people's eating and exercise habits, for better or (usually) worse. Many advocates, of course, would like to shift the emphasis from an exclusive focus on *individual responsibility* to an awareness of *collective responsibility* for the conditions that determine fitness.

Before this idea can be fully appreciated, however, Americans must be able to focus more clearly on the importance of the conditions themselves, which is the focus of the recommended model.

The tested material did include efforts to build in a sense of collective action and collective responsibility. In some cases the material stressed *how* we should act (e.g. by improving environments). In other cases it stressed *who* should act, with an emphasis on public actors. E.g.:

The Food and Fitness Environment of a place is created by decisions by everyone from city councils, to supermarket managers, to school administrators who plan high school gym classes.

Many companies and towns are already improving people's health by working on policies and programs that make the Food and Fitness environment into something that helps us to be healthy rather than something that makes us ill and unfit.

None of these specific references to collective action were consistently picked up on in TalkBack testing.

On the other hand, subjects who heard messages focusing on the Food And Fitness Environment regularly concluded that responsibility for the FFE is collective in nature. We conclude that the findings may simply reflect the complexity of a "two-part" message. While it was ineffective to build the assignment of responsibility in as a "secondary" point in a message focused on the issue of systemic causality, this more basic point does effectively lay the groundwork for a discussion of policies and other collective interventions.

We next discuss responses to two "control" directions that were included in the testing. These are approaches that are already in the discourse in some form and which in some respects resemble the recommended approach discussed earlier.

It is helpful to compare responses to these with the very different, and much more constructive responses to the recommended model.

Control #1: "Inclusive Understanding Of Health"

The first "control" paragraph is taken from a text taken from a *Health Programming Update* published by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (Fall 2005). The stimulus paragraph is meant to approximate a typical statement about the importance of taking "social and economic factors" into account in addressing fitness.

TalkBack subjects heard the following:

Doctors are saying more and more that we need an inclusive understanding of health and fitness that takes into consideration all the social and economic factors that affect the quality of life for individuals and communities. The most important thing is to help people help themselves, especially the most vulnerable. To improve health, fitness and nutrition, we need to increase people's knowledge, and their access to resources and opportunities for living fit and healthy lives.

Testing of this paragraph demonstrates how even texts that seem clear and reasonable can easily allow default understandings to creep in and derail learning.

Reduced to Personal Responsibility and Education

The most striking result is that when subjects were asked to repeat back the stimulus, they had strong tendencies to speak in terms of the powerful default model of Personal Responsibility:

Your paragraph was about empowering individuals to take more responsibility for their own healthcare. And the various ways that that could happen.

Ohio woman, age 39

It is clear from previous research that the Personal Responsibility model tends strongly to reduce the possible solutions to just one: education. This pattern was confirmed in TalkBack.

Just that what we could do is better educate people on exercise and nutrition to become more healthy.

Wisconsin woman, age 56

Health and fitness are very important and we need to do something to educate people and help them help themselves to get fit and stay fit.

New York woman, age 42

The idea of teaching people to make better choices is valid as far as it goes, but consistently “drowned out” more challenging passages about improving the environment around us.

Environmental influences gone

Immediately after hearing the stimulus, subjects were asked to name three things that affect the health/fitness in their town, workplace or neighborhood. Although a few people did mention

actual environmental influences, responses were unfocused and included various other, less helpful considerations:

Their eating choices. Their access to a gym facility. And how much time they have in their day.

Virginia woman, age 37

Three things that help improve health? Diet, exercise, water.

Virginia woman, age 30

People's answers stressed consumption and exercise, rather than any insight that there are *external conditions* that affect what we consume or whether we exercise.

Essentially, the paragraph fails to convey the new perspective that the authors may have intended.

Control #2: Toxic Environment

The tested material also included a comparison paragraph based on the idea of Toxic Environment, as popularized by Kelly Brownell of Yale University. The idea was expressed in the following way:

Doctors say that Americans' health is in jeopardy because of what experts call the Toxic Environment we live in. The Toxic Environment refers to our constant exposure to high-calorie, high-fat, heavily marketed processed foods, as well as our increasingly sedentary lifestyle.

While the statement may seem clear and compelling to insiders, public responses illustrate how "environment" as a term in itself can be less than effective.

No causal link between environment and outcomes

While the term itself was memorable and subjects used it without difficulty, their interpretations focused on consumption and behavior rather than environmental influences.

Doctors believe we are at risk due to the Toxic Environment we live in. Toxic Environment refers to overeating over processed foods and not exercising enough.

New Jersey woman in her 40's

This typical response conveys no sense of how the environment shapes behavior. The problem still boils down to the familiar matter of people's bad habits:

[Toxic environment] refers to the population consuming high fat, high calorie food and not exercising.

Woman, age 31⁴

It refers to people eating too much processed food. Very refined flour and high in sugar without getting exercise, and becoming a slug.

Man, age 30

Importantly, the “solutions” suggested by the Toxic Environment paragraph generally included education or individual choices rather than any effort to change environments.

Eating that kind of food every day is not very healthy. The awareness isn't there about [it]. Everyone knows that smoking is bad for you, heavily drinking is bad for you, but I think a lot of people just don't realize the affects of eating that kind of food day in and day out.

Rhode Island man, age 28

I'm working to get rid of the processed part [of my diet]. So I'm trying to cut down on part of what I consider the toxic environment.

Michigan woman, age 24

Temptations rather than access

An important problem with the idea of Toxic Environment, as it is frequently expressed, is that the idea of *access* is not emphasized. Instead, the issue is boiled down to temptations and bad habits:

High fat foods are everywhere as well as excuses to not exercise. There are too many opportunities to eat high calorie foods and be lazy.

New York woman in her 40s

It is important to note that the term/idea of environment does not guarantee that people think in terms of access.

⁴ For some online subjects, location information is unavailable.

Rejection of the idea

Another important problem is that the loaded term “toxic” causes many people to reject the idea that it is “their” environment that is at issue. When people were asked explicitly whether the idea of the Toxic Environment applied to where they live and work, the responses varied:

Oh does it ever! I'm the queen of toxic foods - my favorite "cheese" is Velveeta, if that gives you any idea!

New Jersey woman, age 40

No, I am not sedentary and don't eat fast food.

New York woman in her 30's

This is a significant problem if the term is meant to increase people's engagement with the problem. The Food and Fitness Environment messages, by contrast, had remarkable success in linking the topic to the subject's own experience.

The Ecology of fitness – alternate language

This general direction – the recommended one, discussed at length in the previous section – emerged as the most likely focus early in the process. Given the current default patterns in Americans' thinking, this was a critical point to *try* to express to lay people, and some early success suggested that it was worth pursuing and refining.

Various terms were tested as possible ways of expressing the central idea of the model. Many of them tested reasonably well, but for various reasons are not presented as recommendations. We now turn to a brief discussion of some that were tested.

Fitness Environment

The term was easily understood and retained by people. Its main weakness was that it did not adequately call to mind the importance of *food and nutrition*. After hearing a stimulus paragraph that included mentions of food, about half of the subjects failed to mention it when they repeated the message back.

The fitness level of a region is determined by a number of factors. The availability of clean air and water, number of parks and walking paths are important.

California man in his 40's

Food and Fitness Assets (and Deficits)

The idea that a place has (or lacks) assets that promote health tested very well for clarity and retention.

Experts agree that every city and town in America can be assessed in terms of its food and fitness assets . . . City planners can make a difference in the health of a community by considering the number of fast food restaurants, gyms and walking paths in their overview of a town.

Connecticut woman in her 30's

The term also was effective at conveying the idea that places ought to try to improve their assets through some kinds of collective efforts.

Those who have access to [food and fitness assets] are in a much healthier category. The local government is in charge of meeting a good level of food and fitness assets.

North Carolina woman, age 23

The term does not figure into our recommendations partly because of a tendency to reduce *assets* to something like specific *amenities* and partly because the term stresses the positive aspects of an environment, rather than suggesting a broader sense of an environment with both positive and negative characteristics. “Deficit” was tested as a complementary term, but fared poorly.

Food and Fitness Setting

This term tested poorly. Overall it was not understood or remembered as well as other terms.

The food and fitness setting affects the way we can predict how an area will fare as far as fitness.

Arizona woman in her 40's

This failure may be because the term Setting does not imply active effects and does not break down into factors in the same way as Environment, for instance. The idea of measuring or evaluating the setting also seemed difficult for people to grasp.

Fitness Score

In some cases, the idea of measurement and evaluation became the emphasis of the stimulus paragraph. For example, Fitness Score was one model that showed some success in testing.

Q: What can be done to improve the score in your town, workplace or neighborhood?

A: Less fast food restaurants, more walkways, less pollution, more public transportation.

Minnesota man, age 22

The main disadvantage of these terms is that people who heard about the “score” often misunderstood it as a measure of the *collective state of people’s health* in a given community, rather than *a measure that is applied to the environment* and its potential to promote or discourage healthy outcomes.

This interpretation is very compatible with a Mentalist understanding – a place might get a “low” score because of common *attitudes* there – and does not suggest a role for concrete intervention.

Health Score; Health Factor

Terms that referred to Health alone were not effective at promoting a focus on fitness.

Subjects responding to these terms tended to focus on issues like environmental contaminants and access to health care.

Fitness Ecology

This term tested quite well for clarity and retention among highly educated subjects. The term “ecology” was discarded because it was unfamiliar to some people, or had strong environmentalist overtones.

We can improve fitness ecology by selecting healthy foods when shopping at supermarkets, working out in a gym, and living an environmentally healthy lifestyle.

Indiana man, age 54

Fitness Climate

The term was easily understood, retained and repeated, once explained. It was ultimately dropped for analytical reasons – climate is not something people easily imagine they can affect.

CONCLUSION

The elicitations on food and fitness revealed an interesting contradiction that reflects Americans' confused and deeply conflicted thinking about the topic. Elicitations subjects told us that Americans are unfit because:

- We are too *busy and hardworking* to consistently exercise or watch our diet.
- We are too *lazy* to consistently exercise or watch our diet.

The following interview excerpt summarizes the problem concisely:

Q: Why are so many people unfit these days?

A: Laziness. Or being too busy.

White woman, age 62, Fort Collins

Americans are confident that we are not as fit as we should be, but fundamentally unclear on why this is so. While advocates have done a successful job in recent years of persuading the public that fitness is important, there is clearly work to be done in helping people sort out what this fact means for our society.

The strength of the Food And Fitness Environment model is that it provides average people with a clear and focused new way to think (more productively) about a (vaguely) familiar idea – an organizing idea that can help them make a new kind of sense out of various information they come across. The conversations about fitness that followed exposure to the model were remarkably different from conversations based on default understandings.

Of course, one exposure to a single paragraph will not eliminate patterns of thinking that have been established over a lifetime, and that are constantly reinforced in the media and other public discourse. But if advocates can work hard to *change* that discourse, by consistently using an idea like Food and Fitness Environment as an organizing idea (along with other message elements that supported it and are reinforced by it), then there is reason to hope the national conversation can shift in more productive directions.

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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APPENDIX: SAMPLE PARAGRAPHS

The following are examples of stimulus paragraphs used in the TalkBack testing.

Food and Fitness Factors

Doctors say that every town, workplace and neighborhood in America can be evaluated in terms of what they call its food and fitness factors. The food and fitness factors where we live or work are one of the most important things determining whether we end up fit and healthy or not. Some food and fitness factors are fairly obvious like access to pollution-free air, healthy food and adequate healthcare. Also, the number of walking paths or fast food restaurants in an area affect the overall state of public fitness. When we improve the food and fitness factors of a place, the health of the people who work and live there improve as well.

Food Cravings Industry

Health experts say that our country's overall health is hurt significantly by imbalances in how the food industry operates. In fact, some experts call it the Food Cravings Industry, because a lot of its profit comes from satisfying cravings rather than nutritional needs. Strong desire for things like fat, salt and sugar is universal and natural, and used to help our species survive. But the Food Cravings Industry has developed in a way that dangerously over-satisfies those drives.

Workplace Fitness Environment

More and more employers are evaluating what they call the "Fitness Environment" in their workplaces. The Fitness Environment has huge effects on everything from the employer's healthcare expenses, to worker productivity, to morale. Many aspects of the Fitness Environment are fairly obvious – like clean air, healthy food choices, and available exercise equipment. Others are more subtle, like the amount of walking people naturally do as part of their jobs. The concept of the Fitness Environment of a workplace is getting more and more attention, and can also be applied to communities and towns.

Health Factor

Doctors say that every town, workplace and neighborhood in America can be evaluated in terms of what they call its Health Factor. The Health Factor of where we live or work has huge effects on whether we end up fit and healthy or not. Some aspects of the Health Factor are fairly obvious, like access to pollution-free air, healthy food and adequate health care. But other aspects of the Health Factor we are only learning about -- like how the number of walking paths or fast food restaurants in an area affects the overall state of public fitness. The Health Factor of a place is created through decisions by everyone from city councils, to supermarket managers, to school administrators who plan gym classes.

Fitness Score

Doctors say that every town, workplace and neighborhood in America can be evaluated in terms of what they call its fitness score. The fitness score of where we live or work has huge effects on whether we end up fit and healthy or not. Some aspects of the fitness score are fairly obvious, like access to pollution-free air, healthy food and adequate health care. But other aspects of the fitness score we are only learning about -- like how the number of walking paths or fast food restaurants in an area affects the overall state of public fitness. The fitness score of a place is created through decisions by everyone from city councils, to supermarket managers, to school administrators who plan gym classes.

FFE and Public Health

Doctors say that we can get tremendous public health gains by improving what experts call the Food And Fitness Environment. The Food And Fitness Environment of a town, neighborhood or workplace has huge effects on whether we end up fit and healthy or not – and on the overall collective health of the population. Some aspects of the Food And Fitness Environment are fairly obvious, like access to pollution-free air and healthy food. But there are other aspects we now understand better than before -- like how the number of walking paths or fast food restaurants in an area affects the overall level of public fitness.

The Group Fitness Effect

Experts are talking about what they call the Group Fitness Effect. It turns out that the overall state of Fitness in the people around us affects us all. For instance, as public fitness declines, this hurts the economy and local communities. Whether or not people are fit or make fitness a priority affects the ways neighborhoods and workplaces are designed

Incidental Exercise

Scientists have discovered that past generations were more physically fit because they benefited from what experts call “Incidental Exercise.” Moving around, walking, playing, even gardening or housework all represent this kind of incidental exercise. Nowadays many companies and towns are trying to use this idea of Incidental Exercise to improve public fitness with such mundane things as sidewalks and bike paths or encouraging employees to take breaks and move around more. Creating a world where incidental exercise is encouraged, rather than discouraged may be the most important tool we have to combat the trends toward ill-fitness that trouble the American population.

Fitness Atmosphere

Doctors say that every home, street or workplace in America can be evaluated in terms of what they call its "Fitness Atmosphere." The Fitness Atmosphere we live in has huge effects on whether we end up fit and healthy or not. Some aspects of this Atmosphere are fairly obvious, like whether you and those around you have access to healthy food and adequate health care. But other parts we are only learning about - like the way local recreation opportunities, and even sidewalks and bike paths affect local health – and also how fit and active the people around you

are. The Fitness Atmosphere of a place is created by decisions by everyone from city councils, to supermarket managers, to the people who plan high school gym classes.

Local Fitness Environment

Doctors say that every place in America can be evaluated in terms of what they call the "Local Fitness Environment." The Local Fitness Environment has huge effects on whether the people that live there end up fit and healthy or not. Some aspects of the Local Fitness Environment are fairly obvious, like access to pollution-free air, healthy food and adequate health care. But other parts we are only learning about - like the way local recreation opportunities, and even sidewalks and bike paths affect local health. The Local Fitness Environment of a place is created by decisions by everyone from city councils, to supermarket managers, to school administrators who plan high school gym classes.

Remaking the Food and Fitness Environment #1

Doctors say that for the sake of the nation's health, every state, town and workplace in America needs to come up with ways to re-make and improve its Food and Fitness Environment. The "Food and Fitness Environment," of a place includes not just whether people have access to decent health care and pollution-free air and water, but things like recreational opportunities, walking paths, the number of fast food restaurants around and so on. In fact, companies and towns that are already making the Food and Fitness Environment a priority are discovering that there are tremendous benefits in terms of economic productivity and the general vitality of communities.

Remaking the Food and Fitness Environment #2

Doctors say that for the sake of the nation's health, every state, town and workplace in America needs to come up with ways to re-make and improve its Food and Fitness Environment. The "Food and Fitness Environment," of a place includes not just whether people have access to decent health care and pollution-free air and water, but things like recreational opportunities, walking paths, the number of fast food restaurants around and so on. In fact, many companies and towns are already improving the health of people by working on policies and programs that make the Food and Fitness environment into something that helps us to be healthy rather than something that makes us ill and unfit.

FFE and Economic Benefits

Economists say that we can get tremendous economic benefits by improving what experts call the Food And Fitness Environment. The Food And Fitness Environment of a town, neighborhood or workplace has huge effects on whether we end up fit and healthy or not - which then affects overall productivity, healthcare costs and so forth. Some aspects of the Food And Fitness Environment are fairly obvious, like access to pollution-free air and healthy food. But there are other aspects we now understand better than before – like how the number of walking paths or fast food restaurants in an area affects the overall level of public fitness.

The National Body

America used to be a pretty healthy, trim nation. Now the national body has grown increasingly flabby. They say that fitness affects everything from your stamina to your ambition to your ability to concentrate and follow through on a task. America is wheezing its way into the 21st century. If it wants to stay competitive in the world it will have find ways to get in better shape.

Big Picture Example: Corn Syrup

There are real connections between fitness and our whole food production system. Just one example is the way the government subsidizes corn and wheat. Much of this cheap plentiful corn gets turned into corn syrup, which is used as a really cheap sweetener. All that corn syrup's got to go somewhere, so there's actually much more sweetener in our diets than there used to be. In fact, because of these policies many junk foods (and junk meats) are cheaper than healthier foods that don't get subsidies.

Big Picture Example: Air conditioning

Researchers have been discovering all sorts of surprising causes for obesity and poor fitness in Americans. For example they've recently discovered that people are heavier now than they used to be because places have air conditioning. Heat suppresses appetite, and air-conditioning over time means people eat more than they used to. There are actually a lot of these kinds of factors that we don't think about that may affect our health.

In addition, past responses to the following stimuli from a project on a related topic (food systems) were reviewed for insights into the topic of food and fitness:

Health Foundations and Runaway Food System #1

Doctors are more and more concerned about what they call our Runaway Food System, because they say it is altering the foundations that our health depends on. We're now using much more powerful tools than ever to produce food – from intensive pesticide use, to genetic engineering, to a shift away from fresh foods and towards more and more processing. This out-of-control system is altering the foundations that health depends on, from soil and water, to the nutritional content of the food we eat, to the genetic make-up of plants and animals. These critical foundations of health will get less and less stable until we get the Runaway Food System under control.

Health Foundations and Runaway Food System #2

Doctors are more and more concerned about what they call our Runaway Food System, because they say it is shifting the very foundations that our health depends on. The foundations that support our personal and public health are not only fresh and nutritious food, but also everything from the quality of our natural environment to the quality of the economy we find ourselves in. Our runaway food system is increasingly undermining

our health foundations on all of these levels. Hyper-intensive, industrial farming, too much marketing of profitable, but unhealthy processed foods, and the economic and environmental foundation shifting that agribusiness has done to rural areas are all aspects of this Runaway food system.

Health Foundations and Runaway Food System #3

Doctors are more and more concerned about what they call our Runaway Food System. Hyper-intensive, industrial farming is putting too many chemicals in the environment and into our bodies. Plants and animals that have been genetically altered are being introduced to the food supply with little public knowledge or debate. Over-marketing of profitable, but unhealthy processed foods is encouraging people to eat unhealthily. This out-of-control system is altering the foundations that health depends on, from the soil and water, up through the entire quality of the American diet. The most pressing health challenge Americans face today is changing the direction of this runaway food system.

Pink Tomato Effect

Experts have become alarmed about what they call the "Pink Tomato Effect." We are seeing more food that is cheap to grow and ship and which may look good on the shelves - but which is unhealthy and poor quality. Because most of the food supply is now in the hands of only a few big companies, competition has declined and consumers are actually finding fewer choices when they go to their supermarkets. Unless consumers and policy-makers start to call out for changes the Pink Tomato Effect will continue to spread from the bland fruits and flavorless meats out to other basic foods as well.

Food Supply Policy

Economists are calling for a national push to put into effect a national food supply policy. We have a national energy policy and a foreign policy. But when it comes to one of the most important domains of life – food – we don't have any plan at all. We don't have a food supply policy for dealing with new biotechnologies or the outsourcing of agriculture to foreign countries, or the changes that factory farming bring to the food supply. We need a policy with a vision of how to best bring about the very best food supply that America can create.

Foodscape

Unlike the American landscape, which we see in films and which we notice when we drive down the highway - most people don't pay much attention to what some experts call the foodscape. And partly that's because some American foodscapes are pretty, like farms and farmers markets, and other foodscapes aren't pretty at all - like factory farms and processing plants. But if we want the American foodscape to continue to produce the highest quality food supply possible - in a way we don't mind looking at, we'll have find ways to preserve and improve the foodscape and the ways we get our food.

Food Circulation System

Experts are concerned about the state of our Food Circulation System. The Food Circulation System constantly moves food from producers to every part of the country. But as the Circulation System has grown more vast and complex it's become vulnerable to problems. It doesn't get enough quality foods to some places, while others end up with more than they need. The system is vulnerable to shocks from rising fuel costs, pesticide problems or changing global agriculture. Experts say that to ensure that Food Circulation doesn't break down, we need figure out ways of managing the system as a whole.