

Building the Bridge to Peace: A Messaging Guide for Peacebuilders



As the current conflict unfolds in Ukraine and the world continues to reel from a global pandemic, the need for peacebuilding is more urgent than ever. However, there's a lot of confusion—and even some misconceptions—within the American public about what peacebuilding entails and how it works. To build public understanding and support for the work that's required to create and sustain peace over time, we need to change the narrative.

The current popular narrative depicts peace as an endpoint—one that is achieved in the absence of conflict or once hostilities end. (For more on how the public understands peacebuilding, read our full research report [here](#).) A more accurate and compelling narrative is needed to portray peace as a process—one that requires flexibility, creativity, and continuously building connections.

Peacebuilders, activists, writers, journalists, and communicators of all kinds can use the evidence-based recommendations below to help a more productive narrative take hold.

What is a Narrative?

Narratives are patterns of meaning that cut across and tie together lots of individual stories. They both reflect and shape how members of a shared culture think. Read more about narrative form and culture change [here](#).

1. Emphasize the *interdependence* of people and communities around the globe.

People have a sense that common threats can yield common purpose. That notion can be leveraged to generate broad buy-in for peacebuilding programs and policies that benefit everyone.

Sample messages:

The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined just how interconnected the world is—what affects one part of the world affects all of us. When we allow violent conflict to happen anywhere, it can spread and disrupt peace everywhere. As a global community, peacebuilding matters to all of us.

As the conflict in Ukraine worsens and painful disruptions are felt across the world, it's clear that dialogue and diplomacy are needed to rebuild peace and stability for everyone.

Tip: Avoid focusing on the narrow benefits of peacebuilding to a certain region or group of people. Instead, take every opportunity to highlight our interconnectedness, which broadens support for peacebuilding by bringing everyone into the picture.

*Tip: Use a variety of terms that convey interdependence, such as **common, connected, mutual, global, collective, interrelated, and intertwined**.*

2. Use the metaphor of *Bridge Building* to explain the active, ongoing nature of the work.

People tend to think of peace as occurring passively, whenever war and violence are not being waged. We can shift this perception by comparing peacebuilding to bridge building, which is clearly understood to require skill, time, resources, and the determined efforts of many different people.

Sample messages:

Peacebuilding, like bridge building, is a project. Only by committing ourselves to the continuous task of creating and sustaining peaceful relations can we reduce violence around the world and diminish the possibility of war.

Even as the war in Ukraine continues, we remain committed to the long-standing project of building peace in the region. Through the ongoing tasks of diplomacy, dialogue, and support for local nonviolent movements in Ukraine and elsewhere, we can diminish the possibility of conflict and reinforce the structures we need to maintain peaceful societies.

*Tip: Draw on the rich and varied language around building bridges to spark more proactive thinking about what peacebuilders do. Here are a few words and images to get you started: **strong, sturdy, build, maintain, support, careful planning, dependable, reinforce, construct, upkeep, connect, span, link, straddle, solid footing, structure, reach across, reliable, sturdy, long-standing, design, repair, sustain.***

3. Share concrete examples to illustrate what peacebuilding programs can achieve.

Peacebuilding remains a vague notion for most people—a lofty idea that’s associated with good intentions rather than a practical set of actions. Pointing to the specific work peacebuilders do helps people appreciate its value and real-world consequences.

Sample messages:

During the Ebola outbreak in East Africa, there was a breakdown in trust and communication between citizens and their governments and between citizens and their neighbors. Local peacebuilders worked with public health officials and law enforcement to conduct community outreach sessions to directly provide credible information about the public health crisis, helping to stop the burning of local health clinics. They also negotiated with the leaders in several border communities to get their buy-in for closing the porous borders between countries to stem the spread of the deadly disease. Ebola cases did not spread worldwide in large part because of local peacebuilders’ successful communications efforts within communities and with key stakeholders.

The current conflict in Ukraine reveals the importance of building people-to-people diplomacy among ordinary citizens on the ground in addition to forging connections between official governments, a process known as citizen democracy. For instance, everyday people outside the war zone can send empathetic messages to people in Russia and among the Russian diaspora, emphasizing our common humanity and shared values. Meanwhile, international peacebuilders can fund and support anti-war activists and political dissidents in Russia. This builds a culture of peace and dialogue at every level of society, creating common security and lasting peace.

Tip: Get specific. Provide as many details as possible about a successful program or ongoing initiative—in an actual place and involving real-life peacebuilders—to help the broader public see peacebuilding as practical and possible.

Tip: Connect the dots. Explain how programs affect people at home and connect the local to the international.