



Explaining the Value of Public Health

There are known reasons why the public doesn't always understand the value of public health. People tend to conflate the role of health care with the role of public health, struggle to grasp how preventative approaches work, and assume that health outcomes are primarily due to individuals' health behaviors. These widely shared mindsets make it hard for people to understand what public health does, how it approaches health issues, and why it's essential for society's prosperity and wellbeing.

The framing strategies below can help to reorient conversations and build understanding about why public health matters and how it works.

Begin by painting an expansive view of health. When people assume that health is simply the absence of illness, it's easy to conclude that the main society-wide strategy for managing health is better health care. This way of thinking leaves public health approaches out of the mental picture.

Instead of this...

By investing in public health, we can prevent chronic diseases like heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.

Try this...

By supporting our public health agencies, we can promote greater physical, mental, and social health in our communities.

Find a good example of how prevention works in your field and use it often. It's notoriously hard to communicate the value of prevention: How do you demonstrate the impact of something that *didn't* happen? Concrete examples can help people grasp how public health works. Choose one that's unlikely to be controversial or polarizing and use it to introduce your work, setting the stage for topics that may be more difficult.

Before you say something like this...

Public health works to prevent health and safety issues by taking a four-step approach: define the problem, identify risk and protective factors, develop and test prevention strategies, and ensure widespread adoption.

Try something like this...

To improve safety at a broad scale, public health looks for ways to prevent injuries. One example is restricting new drivers from the most dangerous situations—like driving at night—until they have gained experience.

Direct attention to different essential aspects of public health by using tested metaphors.

When you need to...	Try this...
Explain the value of public health collaboration with other sectors like health care, education, or housing	Compare cross-sector collaborations to building the foundation of community wellbeing , with each sector laying parts of it, and all sectors depending on the results.
Demystify the need for public health data and informatics and justify their value	Compare public health data to the GPS systems and apps we rely on for driving directions. Collecting, compiling, and displaying the data is complicated, behind-the-scenes work that benefits us all.
Explain the vital role of public health monitoring and surveillance	Compare public health to an airline ground crew that performs specific, routine checks to ensure collective safety.
Build support for public health approaches that apply policy levers to improve social and living conditions	Compare negative influences or risk factors to forms of pressure that affect everyone in a community, and portray public health approaches as ways to relieve that pressure.

For more resources on communicating the value of public health, visit www.phrases.org/