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Promoting Health Literacy With Empathetic and Inclusive Communication

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CommunicateHealth

Editor's Note:

The National Environmental Health Association strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature this column on environmental health services from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in every issue of the *Journal*.

In these columns, authors from CDC's Water, Food, and Environmental Health Services Branch, as well as guest authors, will share tools, resources, and guidance for environmental health practitioners. The conclusions in these columns are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of CDC.

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When it comes to navigating health information, reading skills are not the whole picture. **Health literacy** also plays an important role. Health literacy is the ability to find, understand, and use health information. People who have been marginalized or medically underserved might face even more obstacles to getting the health information they need.

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Overall, 9 out of 10 people struggle to understand health information (Agnes et al., 2008). At first glance, that statistic might seem discouraging, but there is good news. By taking a **clear and inclusive approach** to communication, environmental public health professionals can make health information easier to understand, build trust, and show **empathy** for our readers. Communicating with empathy means showing our readers that we understand and value their feelings, perspectives, and experiences. Use these seven tips to promote health literacy with empathetic and inclusive communication.

1. Learn From Your Audience

What are the communication needs and preferences of your readers? What barriers could keep them from accessing information? The best way to learn about the concerns and questions of your readers is to get their input, which can be done through user testing (e.g., surveys, focus groups) or by reaching out to your personal or professional networks.

You can also check resources from community-led or self-advocacy organizations to learn about the issues that are important to your audience. For example, if you are creating materials about maternal and reproductive health for Black audiences, you could explore resources from the Black Mamas Matter Alliance (<https://blackmamasmatter.org/about/>).

2. Use Clear Language

Follow these tips to write in a way people can understand and relate to:

- Write how you talk: Use a friendly, conversational tone to make materials approachable.
- Choose simple words: Ask yourself, “Will my audience hear this term from doctors or other professionals they interact with?” If not, consider leaving it out. If you do need to use a complex or technical term, define it.

3. Use Inclusive Language

Using inclusive language can help you connect with diverse audiences—and help readers see themselves in your health communication materials. Try these tips to make your writing more inclusive:

- Choose inclusive terms: For example, you could use “partner” instead of “husband or wife” and “pregnant people” instead of “pregnant women” to be more inclusive.
- Offer specific examples to contextualize newer terms: Never underestimate the power of examples. If you are writing about mobility aids, consider adding some examples: “mobility aids—such as wheelchairs, canes, or walkers.”
- Pair newer, more inclusive terms with more familiar terms: For example, if you are writing about reproductive health, you could use the phrase “women and people with uteruses” to be more inclusive of transgender and nonbinary audiences.

4. Consider Person-First Versus Identity-First Language, But Use What Your Audience Prefers

Many people learn that person-first language (“person experiencing homelessness,” not “homeless person”) is always the most respectful approach. But some groups prefer identity-first language (“deaf person,” not “person who is deaf”). If you are not sure, talk to members of your intended audience.

5. Acknowledge Uncertainty and Challenges

People often feel vulnerable in uncertain situations, such as when they are facing a health threat. Check out these tips:

- Be honest about what you do not know: Acknowledge that researchers are still learning new information and that the situation might change over time.
- Emphasize what you do know: State the facts based on the latest science and cite trustworthy sources.
- Help people spot misinformation and pseudoscience: Encourage readers to get trustworthy information from their local health department or university. If readers have specific health concerns, suggest that they talk with their healthcare provider.

6. Choose Relatable and Authentic Visuals

Include people of different ages, races and ethnicities, genders, abilities, and body types. Avoid reinforcing stereotypes. For example, do not show only White male doctors in health materials.

7. Make Your Advice Easy to Act on

Empathetic health communication includes providing manageable action steps. Try these tips:

- Give clear action steps: Be specific about what to do and how to do it. Tell readers how they will benefit from taking action.
- Include visuals: People may struggle to follow written directions, especially when they are stressed or overwhelmed. Consider adding photos, illustrations, or infographics to help readers understand key action steps.
- Make sure action steps are doable: Consider barriers that might prevent readers from acting. For example, if lack of health insurance is a barrier for your readers, link to free or low-cost health service resources.

When people see themselves reflected in health communication materials, they are more likely to connect with our messages and follow our recommendations. By taking a clear and inclusive approach to health communication, we can help our readers feel seen and heard.

Reference

Agness C, Murrell E, Nkansah N, & McHenry C (2008). Poor health literacy as a barrier to patient care. *The Consultant Pharmacist*, 23(5), 378–386. 10.4140/tcp.n.2008.378 [PubMed: 18540791]

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Additional Resources

Explore these resources from the Clear Writing Hub offered by the National Center for Environmental Health/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

- Use these five tips for communicating with empathy: www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/health-communication-empathy.html
- Watch these three online training modules to improve the clarity of your materials: www.cdc.gov/nceh/clearwriting/clear_writing_training_modules/index.html
- Improve your understanding of health literacy with this online training: www.train.org/cdctrain/course/1105934/details