

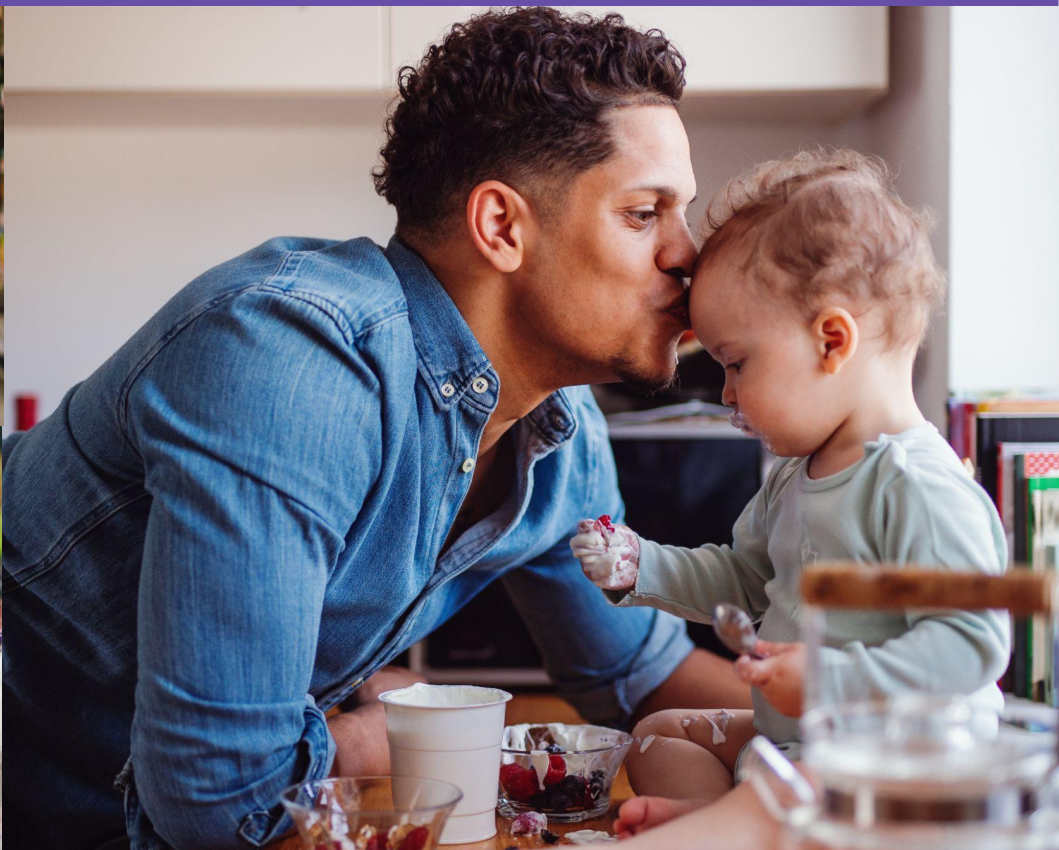


**PRO
DEMOCRACY**
narrative playbook

PUBLIC HEALTH + DEMOCRACY

Narrative + Message Guide

ENGAGE NEW AUDIENCES AND BUILD PUBLIC WILL



Metropolitan Group
the power of voice

metgroup.com

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This is a living document that will be updated periodically as we learn more about how the narrative is working, have examples to share of public health messages and actions based on the narrative, and make adjustments informed by observation and input. Please sign up for updates from the [Campaign for the Public's Health](#) to receive the latest.



COLLABORATORS

This guide was developed by Metropolitan Group (MG) in partnership with the Campaign for the Public's Health at the American Public Health Association, with support from Eyes on Health. For more about MG, please see page 21. For all partners of the Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook, please visit prodemocracynarrativeplaybook.org/about.



The [Campaign for the Public's Health](#) is bringing together partners and allies from every sector to stand up for healthy people and healthy communities. At a time when programs, policies, research, funding, and the very systems that keep our communities safe are under threat, we cannot afford to stand still. We must act—boldly and together—to protect essential services, defend equity, and rebuild a public health system that truly serves everyone. This Campaign is about more than short-term defense; it's about driving lasting change and building a stronger, fairer, and healthier future for all. It is coordinated by the American Public Health Association, a convenor, catalyst, and advocate to build capacity in the public health community. Please visit the link above or email campaign@apha.org to join the Campaign.

eyes on health

Eyes on Health works to ensure that our health information ecosystems help everyone make decisions that align with their health goals and to promote positive change in the way we think and talk about health in communities and as a nation. We focus on the systems that shape what people see and believe about health, and we look for practical ways to make those systems more honest, fair, and responsive to people's real lives. By backing efforts that lift up shared values, trustable information, and constructive public discourse, Eyes on Health supports stronger, healthier communities and the democratic norms they depend on.

INTRODUCTION

This narrative builds public will for the public's health by leveraging a [deeply researched pro-democracy narrative](#) augmented with insights from public health advocates. This narrative provides the framing and “big idea” that can hold many public health issues, experiences, and calls to action — which, together, amplify a rallying cry: **Advancing the public's health is part of creating a free and fair society. And it depends on all of us.**

Our theory of change

What we believe: Regardless of the party in power, decisions about the public's health should be based on what's best for the people and our latest understanding of lived and scientific evidence, free of political benefit or influence. In an open and honest government, separation of power means that health policies and decisions can be made at different levels of government, and if a decision harms the public's health, there is recourse. The systems to protect the public's health rely on democratic norms: representation, accountability, and responsiveness to both individuals and the collective.

Challenge	Opportunity	Need	Action	Impact
Coordinated, resourced efforts to delegitimize science, institutions, and democracy are harming the public's health in real time. Authoritarian actions are eroding evidence-based protections and prevention, and shuttering the science and civic discourse that keeps the public health system moving forward.	Health and the principles of a free and fair democracy are shared values and priorities, defying U.S. partisan stereotypes. But existing narratives about both public health and democracy are often technical, deficit-framed, and defensive, struggling to define the benefits to people's daily lives. Many authoritarian narratives, on the other hand, use emotion and relatable language. Advancing a new narrative can build public will for the public's health by establishing it as a core tenet of democracy.	Build an evidence-based narrative that resonates with a broad set of audiences to position the public's health as a core component of an inclusive democracy and a strong democracy as essential to a functioning public health system.	Amplify the narrative in the Campaign for the Public's Health and in proactive, reactive, and rapid-response communication. Support many organizations to use the narrative by providing tools, technical assistance, and peer learning.	Individually and collectively, public health champions engage and activate a broader audience. They push back on authoritarian, anti-science, and other harmful narratives.

VALUES AND PILLARS

Values at the root of the public health pro-democracy narrative

These values come from extensive pro-democracy narrative research. The public health group that adapted the pro-democracy narrative for public health underscored the values that most align with public health.

PROSPERITY thriving	FAIRNESS equity and justice, dignity	RESPONSIBILITY
FAMILY / BELONGING interdependence, compassion, respect	FEARLESSNESS / STRENGTH courageousness	SAFETY / SECURITY
HONESTY authenticity	FREEDOM	REPRESENTATION

A note about freedom

In the pro-democracy narrative testing, freedom was the top value seen as core to democracy across all major demographic groups. Survey respondents said it's relevant in their life and country, and have a strong willingness to share messages about freedom. But, people have asked during development of the public health narrative, how does freedom work in discussion of public health? Some narrative workshop participants celebrated the opportunity to reclaim freedom as a shared value, reach audiences who center that specific value, and discuss public health in a new, engaging way. Others raised the tension between individual freedom and collective well-being, and between freedom *to* and freedom *from*. Others underscored an equity gap: Because our systems were built to constrain liberty, not everyone experiences freedom—having it, losing it, struggling with it—in the same way. We need to make the case for what we're creating, to hold the constitution and democracy to make good on their promises.

Since freedom can mean different things to different people, public health's opportunity is to boldly and courageously say what freedom means for public health. As Dr. Sandro Galea, dean of the School of Public Health at Washington University in St. Louis, wrote, we need to "assert that freedom from disease—a healthy life—is a core aspirational freedom that needs to be afforded the same space in the national debate as freedoms 'to.' We have the opportunity to 'make the case that both freedom 'from' and freedom 'to' are equally valid, essential characteristics of a society that prioritizes health and human rights for all populations." ([Source](#)) How you do this will vary depending on your audiences' concerns and needs, and the words used in your community, geography, or sector. See ideas in the

message section for using the word freedom and/or describing what it looks and feels like. The meaning of freedom, and the tension between individual freedom and collective well-being, is vital to explore and discuss with respect and humility. You'll see the messages name the tension directly. This is also a great opportunity for conversation with your audiences.

Pillars of the public health pro-democracy narrative

1. Center evidence-based values (above) that resonate across a broad audience—especially freedom, which is the top value seen as core to democracy across all major demographic groups.
2. Say what we're for: Prioritizing the public's health as a core element of an inclusive and participatory democracy—being clear that a democracy is about more than elections.
3. Amplify benefits that the public health sector best advances in a democracy.
4. Connect public health and democracy to people's everyday lives; use relatable language and keep the public's health centered (at equal or higher focus than systems, dollars, workforce).
5. Remind people that both democracy and public health are a shared responsibility—and we can improve them together.
 - Name the forces intentionally harming the public's health and why this is happening.
 - Show a role for sectors and individuals in strengthening the public's health and democracy.
 - Convey we can improve the public's health and democracy together.
6. Acknowledge that democracy and the public health system aren't perfect. Lead with humility and authenticity, and convey that we can improve both together.

NARRATIVE AND MESSAGE FRAMEWORK

Core narrative and messages

The core narrative, shown on the following page, is the most concise statement of the big idea, weaving together vision, benefits, challenges, and solutions.

The narrative messages that accompany it—benefits, challenge, solution, and call to action—are the main ideas embedded in the narrative. You can use these messages as-is, but you don't have to; this is not a message guide. You can adapt them to your organization's voice, specific issues, and clear calls to action. You can mix and match them in any order. The aim is to align with the big ideas of the narrative so that your voice, and many other voices, contribute to a new way of seeing the world.

The core narrative and messages are color coded to align with the values described on page 4.

Advancing the public's health is part of creating a free and fair society.
And it depends on all of us.

CORE NARRATIVE

The public's health is **stronger** in a democracy **firmly** grounded in **freedom, fairness,** and **shared responsibility to one another**. This means that leaders are **accountable to the people** and decisions are **made openly**, guided by both **science** and **community wisdom**. It also means we see how **our lives are connected**, and acknowledge that our **freedom to make choices about our own health should not cause preventable harm to others**. **Together we can make sure everyone** lives in **communities** that prioritize the **public's health**—including **clean air and water, safe foods,** and **protection from disease, injury, and violence**. That's what democracy looks like in daily life.

BENEFIT

When the systems that **protect** the **public's health**—made up of local governments, community organizations, and state and national agencies—are **strong** and **responsive to communities' needs**, people can **thrive**. We can **all** live our lives with **confidence** that we have **clean drinking water, safe workplaces and schools**, and the ability to **gather without worrying** that our **health or safety** might be **put at risk** by others. That increases **trust** in **our** systems and **each other**, and gives us more **freedom** in our everyday lives.

CHALLENGE

When **protections** are weakened, **preventable diseases spread, and we're exposed to more toxins and other risks, communities become less safe**. **Unfair policies, lack of investment, and other barriers keep people from the resources** they need to be healthy—from **safe food and clean air and water, to stable housing and transportation, to living wage jobs**. **These barriers are built higher in some communities**. Government and business leaders make decisions that often prioritize other interests over **people's health and well-being**. When **leaders fail to act openly** or **ignore community needs and experience**, public **trust** erodes and **people feel less secure**. This makes it harder for people to **protect their health, participate fully in community life,** and **have a fair opportunity to live well**.

SOLUTION

The public's health is **strongest** when our democracy **works for everyone**. That means leaders who are **accountable to the people** and decisions that are **transparent**, guided by both **science** and **community wisdom**. When **people have a real say** in the choices that **affect their health and their futures**, we build **stronger, safer communities** for **all of us**.

CALL TO ACTION

Advancing the public's health depends on **all of us**. We take actions that protect both ourselves and each other. **We speak up and participate in decisions. We work through our differences with respect**. This is how we **find solutions** that advance **health** and **safety** in **our communities**, and build a **free society together**.

Additional message details

These are additional points that can help build the narrative. Again, these are to be customized, mixed and matched, and added to by organizations that want to dial up aspects of the messaging, bring in their own examples and calls to action, etc.

Benefits

When the systems that **protect** the **public's health**—made up of local governments, community organizations, and state and national agencies—are **strong** and **responsive to communities' needs**, people can **thrive**. We can **all** live our lives with **confidence** that we have **clean drinking water**, **safe workplaces and schools**, and the ability to **gather without worrying** that our **health** or **safety** might be **put at risk** by others. That increases **trust** in **our** systems and **each other**, and gives us more **freedom** in our everyday lives.

Additional Benefits message points:

- **Advancing the public's health makes freedom real in everyday life.** The health protections we build together are the source of our freedom, allowing us to move through life with safety and the opportunity to thrive.
 - We each make choices about our own health. But many of the things that keep us safe—like clean food and water, protection from disease, access to credible and timely information, and emergency response—depend on systems we build and maintain together. When those systems work well, people have the freedom to make decisions for themselves and their families with confidence.
 - When we're all healthier, people are able to work, children do better in school, we save on health care costs, and recognize many other benefits.
 - Our health is shaped by the conditions around us—our neighborhoods, our environment, and the systems we rely on every day. We all need real input into decisions that affect those conditions. Because when they are strong, we all benefit, and when they fall short, we're all at risk.
 - Freedom to live in a community/society that protects us from disease, injury, and violence is just as important as the freedom to make individual choices. Both are essential in a society that values health, fairness, and human dignity.
- **We share a powerful public health system**—made up of local governments, community organizations, and state and national agencies—that helps create safe, healthy communities. When this system is responsive to people's needs and communities have a voice in decisions, trust grows.
- **When leaders are open and honest about how decisions are made and how they protect people's health, people can feel confident that institutions are working in the public's interest.** And when those most affected by challenges are part of shaping solutions, we build stronger communities and a more responsive democracy—where shared resources like parks, schools, transportation, and public safety benefit everyone.

Challenge

When **protections** are weakened, **preventable diseases spread, we're exposed to more toxins and other risks, and communities become less safe. Unfair policies, lack of investment, and other barriers keep people from the resources** they need to be healthy—from **safe food and clean air and water, to stable housing and transportation, to living wage jobs. These barriers are built higher in some communities.** Government and business leaders make decisions that often prioritize other interests over **people's health and well-being.** When **leaders fail to act openly or ignore community needs and experience,** public **trust** erodes and **people feel less secure.** This makes it harder for people to **protect their health, participate fully in community life, and have a fair opportunity to live well.**

Additional Challenge message points:

Across the country, people are facing real challenges to the public's health. These challenges affect our safety, our freedom, and our ability to live with confidence in our daily lives.

- **Protection:** Our health depends on more than individual choices. Clean water, safe workplaces, emergency response systems, and protections that prevent illness are part of the foundation we all rely on. When these safeguards are weakened or under strain, the consequences are real—affecting who gets sick, who stays healthy, and how much it costs families to care for themselves and their loved ones.
- **Division:** At times, it can feel harder to find common ground on public health issues. Balancing individual choices with our shared need for safety and protection can create tension, making it more difficult to move forward together.
- **Power:** People are asking important questions about how decisions are made and who has a voice. When decisions are unclear or don't reflect people's lived experiences, trust can weaken and confidence in public health systems can decline.
- **Priorities:** At times, decisions—whether in policy or the marketplace—don't fully prioritize people's health and well-being. When protections are uneven or insufficient, it becomes harder for families and communities to rely on the systems meant to keep them safe.
- **Fairness:** Not all communities face the same conditions. Some experience greater barriers to health and safety, with fewer resources to respond.¹ Addressing these gaps is part of ensuring everyone has a fair chance to live a healthy life.
- **Cost:** When public health systems are under-resourced, the costs don't disappear—they grow. Preventable illnesses, emergency care, and strain on first responders all go up. This affects families, communities, and public safety systems. Investing in prevention helps reduce these avoidable costs and strengthens community resilience.
- **Humility:** Public health systems and workers have made important contributions to people's lives. At the same time, there have been moments when systems have fallen short—when communities have not been fully heard or communication has not been clear. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is part of building stronger, more responsive systems moving forward.

¹ You may expand discussion of structural racism, disproportionate access to resources in urban and rural communities, and other forms of exclusion and oppression. For guidance, see the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's [structural racism and public health message guide](#).

Solution

The public's health is **strongest** when our democracy **works for everyone**. That means leaders who are **accountable to the people** and decisions that are **transparent**, guided by both **science** and **community wisdom**. When **people have a real say** in the choices that **affect their health and their futures**, we build **stronger, safer communities** for **all of us**.

Additional Solution message points:

- **Protection:** A strong public health system protects all of us. It works behind the scenes to prevent harm and stands ready to respond when emergencies arise. It helps keep our water clean, our food nutritious, our workplaces safe, and our communities prepared—so everyday life is more stable, affordable, and secure.
- **Collective action:** When the public health system is working well, communities help define problems, priorities, and solutions, guided by evidence and real-world experience. Public health leaders communicate clearly about decisions, and people can ask questions, share concerns, and be heard.
- **Voice:** People need real opportunities to take part in decisions that affect their health and their lives. That includes providing input, voting, participating in healthy debate, and helping shape local solutions.
 - Participating in decisions strengthens both our democracy and our health. In communities with inclusive voting policies, people are more connected and healthier.²
- **Shared benefit:** The goal of the public health system is to make the whole population healthier—and that benefits all of us. For communities facing greater risks and fewer resources, these protections are especially important. If basic protections like clean water aren't available to everyone, the system isn't working as it should.
- **Security:** Public health data, policies, and services help people navigate a complex world with confidence. Without them, people are left to make decisions without reliable information—leading to greater uncertainty and preventable harm.

² [The Democracy Index, from Institute for Responsive Government](#), also reports that states with more inclusive voting policies and greater levels of civic participation have better public health outcomes. States with exclusionary voting laws and lower levels of civic participation are less healthy. When people feel healthier and more connected to their neighbors they feel valued and are more likely to vote and engage in other aspects of community life. Being healthy means people can physically vote, and have the time and energy to follow voting processes and make voting decisions. The Index has additional messages and recommended actions.

Call to action

Advancing the public's health depends on **all of us**. We take actions that protect both ourselves and each other. **We speak up and participate in decisions. We work through our differences with respect.** This is how we **find solutions** that advance **health** and **safety** in **our communities**, and build a **free society together**.

Additional Call to action message points:

- **Our role**
 - Advancing the public's health depends on all of us—staying informed, speaking up, participating in our communities, and working through differences. Together, we can build systems that reflect our shared values and protect our future. That's how we strengthen both our freedom and the well-being of our communities.
- **Opportunities**
 - There are many ways people can take part in shaping a healthier future. For example:
 - Supporting access to safe, healthy food for families in every community.
 - Encouraging clean air and water so everyone can live in safe environments.
 - Expanding access to affordable, quality health care.
 - Promoting healthy habits and prevention alongside care and treatment.
 - Ensuring communities have the resources they need to stay healthy.
 - These are shared goals that help people live healthier lives and strengthen our communities.
- **Taking action**
 - **Supporting the public's health:** Demand that public health decisions are based on the latest scientific knowledge and community input—not political pressure. This includes holding leaders accountable for how policies, rules, and funding decisions are made, so they reflect evidence and the real needs of communities.
 - **Voting:** Ensure fair access to voting for all people. Vote to support decisions that affect our health and communities.
 - **Speaking up:** People who can speak out safely must share experiences, ask questions, and participate in community conversations to ensure that decisions reflect real needs. We have to show support for those who are the first to break the silence. And we have to keep working to give all people the space and safety to be heard.
 - **Working through differences:** Healthy communities are built when people can come together—even when they disagree—to listen, learn, and find solutions that work for everyone. Respectful dialogue and collaboration help build trust and stronger outcomes.

TIPS + TOOLS TO ALIGN
YOUR WORK TO THIS NARRATIVE

Try it!

Break the spiral of silence. In a [webinar on talking about public health and democracy](#), Katherine Schaff from Berkeley Media Studies Group described how when public health professions aren't telling our story, other voices quickly step into the void. We need to speak out when we are safe to do so. Try this narrative with your audiences and see how they respond. Adapt and try again.

- Need more help? Email info@prodemocracynarrativeplaybook.org

We also have to build vocal, visible support for those who are the first to break the silence. Use power mapping and power analysis to be strategic about building narrative power while also thinking about who can speak out and how to build political cover for them.

"I hope to use this language in public health analyses and advocacy, with the public and on the Hill. I hope to incorporate it into op-eds and publications that are under construction. I'd like to infuse it into the work of my colleagues who focus on governance and democracy issues."

—Participant in narrative design workshops

Tailor for your audiences

The narrative and core messages are grounded in the [Freedom Matters pro-democracy narrative](#) and designed to appeal and "bridge to" a broad audience that invites more people into conversation. (See the [Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook](#) for details about the audiences this narrative engages.) We created this public health narrative by tailoring the Freedom Matters narrative with insights from public health message testing and input from people doing narrative and message work across the sector. We also assessed the content for alignment with the bridging language that invites people into a conversation about civic engagement.

This is a narrative, a big idea that gets reinforced through many unique stories and experiences. It is not a message frame that must be used as-is. To be effective in reaching and engaging audiences, narrative and messaging must be tailored to specific communities or populations and grounded in cultural relevance, reflecting both the cultural heritage and the contemporary lived experience of your audiences. Messaging that fails to be grounded in cultural context or disregards current realities will raise concerns about credibility and is bound to be rejected.

You are welcome to use the exact language in the narrative and messages if it works for your audiences and allows you to increase your reach and build broader support. You may also adapt the messages to fit your voice, stance, and calls to action. Just be sure to stay in alignment with the values and principles, and reflect the big ideas of the narrative.

As we begin to use the narrative in practice, we will work with the Campaign for the Public's Health to adapt it with specific audiences, as possible, and assess its effectiveness. We'll continue to share learnings and updates throughout this collaborative effort to build public will for the public's health, grounded in the principles of a functioning democracy.

Tell and create great stories

Real talk. One of the most powerful things you can do is tell stories—real, personal, compelling stories—about how the public's health is at risk in your community. For example, Dr. Monica Wang [wrote about](#) a Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) speaker at a recent event who began: "I grew up in Appalachia, and my community is often referred to as the bedrock of the opioid crisis." Wang said she "was hooked—and so was the rest of the room. (The speaker) described how the opioid epidemic had devastated members of her family and community, and how rural areas like hers face overlapping barriers to health: limited health care access, lack of healthy food, and economic disinvestment. She spoke about traveling for work and struggling to find healthier food options beyond 'a bottle of water and a box of graham crackers.' She didn't cite studies or statistics, and she didn't have to."

What are the conditions and experiences you see every day that would help your audience see these challenges? Where do you have stories of public health showing up for people?³ The Campaign for the Public's Health is gathering a storybank for shared use. Sign up at Campaign@apha.org for updates on accessing the stories and adding your own.

Here are some additional storytelling tools:

- Berkeley Media Studies Group uses George Lakoff's Cognitive Levels: Level one is values. Level two is issues. And level three is policy detail. Often in public health, people start (and stay) at level 3. Our audiences need us to be at level one. Use the narrative principles and the core values to check yourself as you work. BMSG also reminds us to use "landscape" versus "portrait" stories. Where a portrait focuses on a specific person or individual outcome (which can get into individualism and blame), a landscape shows all of the factors around that person or outcome, keeping the conversation at the system level. This [article from BMSG](#) addresses both Cognitive Levels and landscape framing; [this one](#) includes tips to stay with landscape messages even if a reporter keeps asking portrait questions.

³ Dr. Wang's book, [The Collective Cure](#), is a blend of deeply human stories and rigorous research about complex issues. The stories show how social and structural factors like income, occupation, race and ethnicity, neighborhood conditions, and social connections, shape well-being. You can cite these stories in your work and use them as models for your own storytelling.

Remember stories are experiences, places, interactions — not just words

Practice humility. One of the narrative pillars is to acknowledge that public health professionals don't always get it right, and the system isn't perfect. Talking about what we want, and how we can create that together, is important. And, depending on the context and audience, it can be very meaningful and trust-building to say directly, with humility: "We want to keep doing better." This can be a good way to open conversation—and deeply listen—in communities.

Continually improve and describe how you are improving. Katelyn Jetelina, who writes as [Your Local Epidemiologist](#), has discussed systemic weaknesses that became glaringly obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the loop of scientists only talking to other scientists rather than communities. She points out that official agencies (like the CDC) are often too slow, too clinical, and too "sanitized" in their messaging, providing blanket recommendations that don't account for individual risk tolerances or specific communities' concerns. This leads to a loss of trust and creates a vacuum that misinformation fills instantly. She recommends:

- Meeting people where they are. Instead of waiting for the public to visit a government website, Jetelina argues that public health must live on Substack, TikTok, and Instagram. This builds proactive engagement rather than relying on damage control.
- Sharing the why. Instead of just giving a recommendation, public health professionals can share the raw data, the limitations of that data, and the logic behind the conclusion. This builds "procedural trust" even when the data changes.
- Serving as a "data translator." Jetelina focuses on how public health provides the actual public with the agency to manage their own health. She views her impact as "data translation." By explaining the current levels of respiratory viruses or the efficacy of a new booster, she empowers individuals to make "micro-decisions" (e.g., "Should I wear a mask on a plane today?").
- Creating two-way communication: A major opportunity Jetelina highlights is moving away from "top-down" lecturing. For example, she uses her comment sections and surveys to find out what people are actually confused about (e.g., "Can I take my toddler to a grocery store?") and answers those specific, practical questions. Understanding *why* people are hesitant to follow guidance is as important as the science behind the guidance itself.

How you show up matters. Alister Martin, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, says: "You can't just message your way out of a trust crisis. You have to earn your way out of it. ... Trust is built by repeatedly showing up and helping solve people's real needs. ... [That] opens the door to the broader public health conversations we need to have, on vaccinations, on insurance coverage, on benefits access. ... The service is the message. This is public health."⁴

Action, empathy, and compassion are important elements of narrative change that rebuilds trust in public health. Good messaging *tells* one part of the story; empathetic communications *show* awareness

⁴ via LinkedIn on April 7, 2026.

and consideration of an audience's emotions, beliefs, and experiences.⁵ Compassionate narratives support and inform audiences in a responsive way — the Public Health Communications Collaborative calls this [communicating with H.E.A.R.T.](#):

- **Humility:** Acknowledge that the public health system doesn't have all the answers and that the situation is complex.
- **Honesty:** Be transparent about what is known and what isn't. If the system made a mistake or a policy changed, they recommend saying so directly rather than being defensive.
- **Engagement:** Instead of talking *at* people, listen first, with an open and curious mind. Consider biases you may bring to your listening before a conversation starts or before you review responses. Avoid formulating answers in your mind while you are listening to a response.
- **Accessibility:** Use plain language. Jargon can make people feel excluded or like they are being talked down to, which fuels anger.
- **Resonance and Reach:** Ensure the message reflects the community's actual lived experience. Gain deeper insight into the perspective of your audience instead of focusing on yours. Use [bridging statements](#) to acknowledge a question, briefly respond, and then convey what you want people to know (e.g., "This is an evolving issue, but what is clear right now is ...").

In your call to action, provide specific actions that you want your audience to take.

The call to action in the message framework should not be used verbatim. Without stating specifically which actions you want people to take, your audience can be left feeling motivated, but unsure of what to do next.

Based on your organization or movement's work, augment the call to action with specific opportunities ranging from signing up for more information to participating in a town hall or public meeting, to sharing this information with family and friends to supporting and advocating for specific policies or practices.

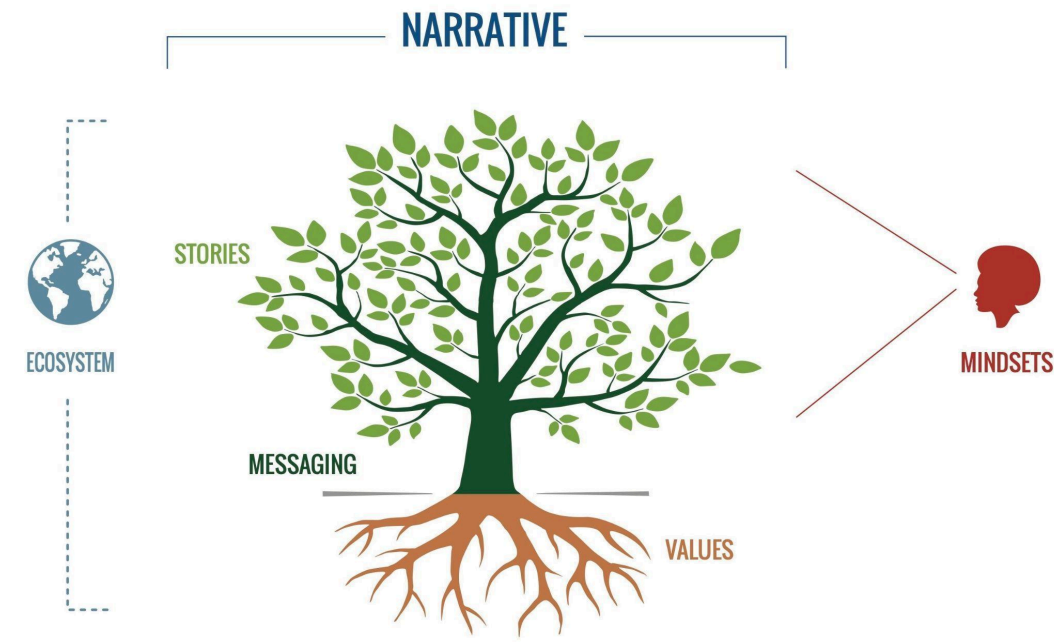
Coming soon: Examples of the narrative, applied to public health issues

We want to build out these examples with you. If you're working to apply this narrative in everyday situations, as well as with issues such as vaccines, funding for public health research, necessary tradeoffs involved in pandemic policies (e.g., the social costs of school closures), and more, please share what you create. Need help? Reach out to info@prodemocracynarrativeplaybook.org. As we build and find examples, we'll share them here.

⁵ For additional resources on developing shared understanding of problems and solutions, and relating across cultures and contexts, please see Metropolitan Group's [Bridging Differences or Widening Gaps](#).

APPENDIX A: NARRATIVE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Narrative⁶ is a powerful tool to advance a more just, healthy, and sustainable world. Drawing on our decades of experience in social change, MG defines **NARRATIVE** as the articulation of a particular way of understanding the world and how it works that shapes what people think, believe, and do. Narrative informs our experiences, what we see as normative, how we filter what we believe, how we define problems and solutions, what we accept without challenge, and what we seek to change in systems, policies, and practices. No narrative exists in a vacuum. It is deeply influenced by—and in turn can influence changes in—the social, cultural, environmental, and political ecosystems all around us.



As seen in the illustration, narrative is created, expressed, and experienced through the following:

- **STORIES:** What people experience both literally (through social media, oral tradition, etc.) and figuratively (through policy, built environments, etc.) that aggregates to create a narrative.
- **MESSAGING:** The core ideas that provide the foundational structure for the narrative.
- **VALUES:** The deeply held beliefs that ground the narrative, connect it to what people care about, and increase their likelihood of attention, adoption, and action.
- People's **MINDSETS**, or collection of perspectives and attitudes, shape their receptivity or resistance to narratives and to changes in behavior, social norms, or policies/systems.
- All of this occurs within a narrative **ECOSYSTEM**—the contexts in which people are exposed to narrative, including their environment, lived experience, and their information echo chambers.

⁶ This approach to narrative was created—and is deployed globally—by Metropolitan Group (MG) to build a just, healthy, and sustainable world. For more information about this approach, please visit [Narrative: A Powerful Lever for Social Change](#)

**APPENDIX B: PUBLIC HEALTH + DEMOCRACY
NARRATIVE MESSAGING WORKSHEET**

This worksheet is designed to help you create messages specific to your issue, audience, and call to action, aligned with the narrative.

Part 1 outlines your messaging goals, the audiences you want to engage, and what your audiences need. These questions are evergreen and can guide any of your communications.

Part 2 creates the message that is relevant to your context and audiences, layering in examples, stories, and data.

Part 1: Planning

Answer these questions before you develop messages. Then, after you draft messages, return to these questions to confirm or refine your communication.

1.1 Goal for your messaging: What do you want your messaging to help accomplish, e.g., what changes in understanding and/or actions? (This will inform the call(s) to action you will craft in Part 2.)

1.2 Audiences: Who is in a position to take the actions necessary to accomplish this goal?

1.3 Communication channels/messengers: What communication channel(s) will be most effective for reaching your audience? Who is the most effective (i.e., trusted) messenger for this communication? Or, who is the person already identified as the messenger (e.g., the person delivering a speech or presentation)? What are the strengths and limitations of the communication channel?

Communication Channels	Messengers

1.4 Audiences' values: Based on what you know from research—or can surmise from experience—identify which of the following core values are likely to be most motivating to your audiences.

✓	CORE VALUES	✓	CORE VALUES
	FREEDOM		SAFETY/SECURITY
	FAIRNESS		HONESTY
	FEARLESSNESS/STRENGTH		PROSPERITY
	REPRESENTATION		FAMILY/BELONGING
	RESPONSIBILITY		

Part 2: Message development

This section helps you apply the public health pro-democracy narrative to build messages for your particular issue. **Refer to the core narrative below and the supporting messages on pages 6-10.**

The public's health is **stronger** in a democracy **firmly** grounded in **freedom, fairness, and shared responsibility to one another**. This means that leaders are **accountable to the people** and decisions are **made openly**, guided by both **science** and **community wisdom**. It also means we see how **our lives are connected** and acknowledge that our **freedom to make choices about our own health should not cause preventable harm to others**. **Together we can make sure everyone** lives in **communities** that prioritize the **public's health**—including **clean air and water, safe foods, and protection from disease, injury, and violence**. That's what democracy looks like in daily life.

In crafting your message, **refer to the tips on pages 11-14** and remember the pillars:

- Center evidence-based values that resonate across a broad audience.
- Say what we're for: Prioritizing the public's health as a core element of an inclusive and participatory democracy—being clear that a democracy is about more than elections.
- Amplify benefits the public health sector best advances in a democracy.
- Connect public health and democracy to people's everyday lives; use relatable language and keep the public's health centered.
- Remind people that both democracy and public health are a shared responsibility—and we can improve them together.
- Acknowledge that democracy and the public health system aren't perfect. Lead with humility and authenticity, and convey that we can improve both together.

TIPS	CORE MESSAGE (the summary)
<p><i>What is the most important idea you want your audience to remember?</i></p> <p><i>Include it here, trying to be as clear and direct as possible, making sure to frame the issue in ways that are relevant to your audience.</i></p>	

TIPS	CHALLENGE
<p><i>How would you define the problem or challenge you seek to address? Think of the tangible ways this problem impacts your stakeholders and audiences.</i></p> <p><i>Describe the situation here in ways that would be relevant to your audience. Consider references to local examples, if relevant.</i></p>	

TIPS	SOLUTION
<p><i>How can this problem or challenge be resolved in ways that reflect the identified core values (freedom, fairness, honesty, etc.)?</i></p> <p><i>Think about describing the solution in ways that would be perceived as relevant by your audience.</i></p> <p><i>Be sure to reference things the government can/should do, as well as actions that people might take to be part of the solution.</i></p>	

TIPS	BENEFITS
<p><i>How would your stakeholders and audiences benefit from your proposed solution? Identify benefits that are both tangible (e.g., access to health care or housing) and intangible (promoting freedom or fairness, access to opportunity, etc.).</i></p> <p><i>Think about ways people would benefit both individually and collectively.</i></p>	

TIPS	CALLS TO ACTION
<p><i>What specific, tangible, and realistic actions can your stakeholders and audiences take, and/or what can they demand of their government to help manifest the solution described above?</i></p> <p><i>Consider actions that can be taken both individually and collectively.</i></p>	

Once you have completed your message framework, use it to inspire the content of your communication. You might find it useful to periodically review this worksheet and make adjustments or refinements over time, based on your use of it and response from your audiences.

APPENDIX C: ABOUT METROPOLITAN GROUP

Metropolitan Group (MG) and its sister company, Impacto Social Metropolitan Group (ISMG), are full-service, strategic, and creative global agencies that research, design, test, implement, and evaluate social impact initiatives. MG/ISMG develops and iterates innovation models on the impacts of narratives and social norms on policy, practice, behavior, attitudinal and culture change.

Our recent narrative work domestically and globally has included researching, developing, testing, and/or implementing new narratives to:

- Promote democracy and address rising authoritarianism in 13 countries on five continents, including North America.
- Address structural racism, advance environmental justice, promote reproductive freedom, increase health equity, and support healthy and sustainable food systems in the United States.
- Counter impunity and corruption, defend civic space, advance gender equity, address gender violence, and bolster support for addressing gross human rights violations in Mexico.
- Advance women's rights in Tunisia.
- Promote democracy and defend civic space in El Salvador.
- Advance adoption of clean and renewable energy standards in the United States and Europe.
- Shift narratives about individual wealth and economic growth to shared prosperity and collective well-being.

MG and ISMG partner with local, national, and international organizations to co-create and design social and behavior change (SBC) strategies to advance human rights and to build resilience against authoritarian and anti-democratic narratives that erode public trust in democratic principles and institutions. We work with public agencies, nongovernmental organizations, entrepreneurs, and the private sector. MG is the coordinating partner of the [Pro-Democracy Narrative Playbook](#), an initiative to build open-source narrative infrastructure to support liberal democracy.

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Join Us!

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