

The Language of Health:

An Editorial Style Guide to Effectively Communicate to the Public

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Preface

We cannot deny the power of language. Through words, we share our feelings, emotions, and thoughts. Through language, we convey meaning. This meaning may be subtle, but its power is not. We can affect others. We can create change.

In understanding this power, we acknowledge that what we say and how we say it matters. Language plays an important role in our lives and this is especially important with respect to health. The health field is complex, sometimes contradictory, and messages to the public are often inconsistent. This can lead to confusion and doubt among the public as to what information is trustworthy.

By sharing clear, consistent, effective messages, we are empowered to create healthy communities. With our words, we are helping to shape the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of those around us.

This style guide is a resource to discover best practices in the language of health. Just as the health field is in a constant state of growth and change, the language we use must change with it. This style guide summarizes the latest research in effective strategies, allowing you to create health messages that are accurate, consistent, and persuasive.

With your help, we can promote a kind, optimistic, and compassionate approach to health and, ultimately, change the trajectory of lives.

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Guiding Principles

Health Communication

Focus on the audience: One message will not work for everyone. It is important to remember your audience and their culture, beliefs, community, and environment when crafting messages. Examples are provided throughout this Style Guide, but not all messages will work for all groups. It's always best to share your messages with your audience before using to ensure they are meaningful and effective.

Meet people where they are: Effective messages resonate with the target audience and what they currently believe and do. Provide guidance and recommendations that are realistic and fit within your audience's lifestyle. Small steps can lead to great change, while unrealistic messages (e.g., telling someone with a limited income to eat five cups of fruits and vegetables a day) can decrease the likelihood of positive behavior change.

Enhance cultural appropriateness of messages: To create culturally-centered messages, involve your audience in every step of the creation, delivery, and evaluation process. Use linguistic terms common to your audience and if applicable, translate it to their native language. Provide evidence of how the health topic relates to and impacts your audience so it is perceived as relevant. Lastly, for printed materials, consider the font, colors, and pictures used so that they align with your audience's culture.

Make messages clear: Messages should be clear and understandable for limited literacy and limited health literacy audiences. Write with plain language by using shorter sentences, limiting the number of words with

several syllables, and be concise. Avoid the use of jargon and define terms when necessary.

Provide actionable behaviors: Rather than focus on facts/knowledge alone (e.g., unsaturated fat is good for your heart), list easy, practical 'how-to' behaviors that someone could try (e.g., use olive oil when cooking).

Include only need-to-know information: Stick to a few key points rather than overwhelming your audience with too many facts and recommendations. People are more likely to remember information when only a few key (one to three) points are made.

Put important information first: In flyers and articles, make your point quickly and at the beginning. Do not hide important information half-way through or at the end because people may miss it. Restate the most important information in the conclusion as well.

Keep messages consistent: Hearing the same message repeatedly from multiple sources is necessary when creating a united voice about health. Conflicting messages create confusion and are associated with unhealthy lifestyle beliefs and behaviors.

Use respectful, considerate messages: People cope with stress and trauma in various ways, and sometimes their behavior may not align with conventional expectations. Accepting these behaviors as coping mechanisms, rather than purposeful manipulation or acting out, can help build trust and collaboration. Use respectful messages that come from a place of understanding, rather than judgment and biases.

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Health Communication Cont.

Provide messages of optimism and hope: People are resilient and can recover from past trauma, obstacles, and negative life experiences. To help build resilience and empowerment, use words and phrases that are optimistic and positive.

Collaborate, don't dictate: Using words that foster a sense of working together can empower those who feel powerless. Be mindful of potential power dynamics and use words that support working with your audience (e.g., consider, think about, try).

When possible, ask your audience what they prefer to be referred to as: While there are terms relating to demographics and culture that are generally interchangeable, preferred terms can vary by individual, group, community, and region. Honor each individual and/or group's self-identified preference. When in doubt on the correct term, ask.

Consider if it's necessary to include demographic information: Include the information if pertinent but avoid undue attention to demographics such as racial/ethnic identity, disability, income, etc. if it is not required.

Additional Resources

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) – Gateway to Health Communication.

[Conscious Style Guide.](#)

[Diversity Style Guide.](#)

[Plainlanguage.gov](#)

[National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health](#) – A Guide to Trauma Informed Writing.

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Health

Guiding Philosophy

Health is not merely the absence of disease, but is multidimensional, holistic, and has a variety of influences.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” There are many aspects of health, including physical, emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual, occupational, and environmental wellbeing. All are important for total wellness.

There are many social and environmental influences on health, which can create health disparities and unequal health outcomes across various groups. A goal of public health is to eliminate health disparities so that everyone has equal access to care, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

🗨 Effective messaging strategies

There are multiple dimensions of health, including physical, emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual, occupational, and environmental wellbeing. Focusing on only one aspect of health (e.g., physical health) as the entirety of health can overlook someone’s total health needs. Incorporating terms such as ‘wellness’ and ‘wellbeing’ allows people to see health from a broader, holistic view.

Health is weight-neutral: Weight should not be a primary measure of health status. There are many aspects of health, and a lower weight is not directly linked to improved wellbeing. Focusing solely on weight perpetuates bias that may actually impede someone’s ability to achieve healthy behavior change. Please see the Weight section for more information.

There are social determinants of health: The environment in which we live, work, learn, play, and worship can affect our health status. Even when someone has the desire to practice certain lifestyle behaviors, their social and living environments can either make it difficult, or impossible, to achieve their goals.

Focus broadly on how groups of people are affected rather than one specific race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, etc. To avoid reinforcing stereotypes, discuss how groups of people may have unequal access to health opportunities rather than discussing specific races, incomes, etc.

Health disparities exist: Because of inequalities in our society, health disparities can occur between people of different incomes, race/ethnicities, disabilities, sexual orientations, genders, and other factors. This can result in disease and mortality rates being different across groups and in different areas.

Use common language when discussing complex health issues: In order to be understood by everyone, use common language with real-life examples regarding health, nutrition, social determinants of health, and health disparities that all people can relate to.

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Effective messaging strategies continued

Incorporate the role of personal responsibility as one aspect among many that influences people's health. To appeal to a broad audience who have differing beliefs, discuss both the role of personal responsibility as well as the social determinants of health.

Avoid these messaging strategies...

Framing health as physical health (or one other dimension of health) only: Some people are unable to achieve physical health goals due to disability, illness, or other factors. Framing physical health as the only way to be 'healthy' can discourage those who have a disability, illness, or other circumstances.

Using weight as the end goal of health: Weight is not always directly linked to health status. There are people with a lower body weight that have poor overall health and others with a higher body weight that have excellent overall health. Please see the Weight section for more information.

Focusing only on individuals being responsible for their own health status, while neglecting social determinants of health: While individual lifestyle factors do play a role, there are many social determinants of health that affect someone's ability to access health care, purchase affordable food, be physically active, etc. It is important to discuss both the role of social determinants of health as well as the role of personal responsibility.

Using specific races, incomes, other groups as examples when discussing health disparities. In focus group studies, the public reacted negatively to messages when specific groups of people were used as examples of health disparities. To appeal to broad audiences, it is

more effective to discuss how there are disparities across groups of people in general.

Implying/assuming everyone has equal/easy access to health care: Some groups of people, due to income, race, weight status, or other factors may have difficulty accessing or affording quality health care or may receive a different quality of health care. Additionally, the areas in which some people live or work may not be safe or conducive to certain lifestyle behaviors.

Using technical health terms: Many people do not fully understand the terms 'health disparities,' 'social determinants of health,' or other health-related terms (e.g., hypertension). Using plain language with specific examples will help more people understand what you mean.

Focusing too much on one determinant of health: There are many factors that can influence an individual's health, and when communicating to the public, it's important to not focus too much on one while ignoring the others.

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What to Say

▲ **There are multiple dimensions of health**

Taking care of your physical, emotional, and spiritual needs is important to your wellbeing.

▲ **Health is weight-neutral**

Nourish your body with foods and activities you enjoy.

▲ **Social determinants of health***

Zip code is a better health predictor than genetic code.

▲ **Groups (in general) are affected***

Not everyone has the same opportunities to be as healthy as others.

▲ **Health disparities exist***

Let's give everyone a chance to live a healthy life.

▲ **Using common language***

Health starts in our families, in our schools and workplaces, in our playgrounds and parks, in the air we breathe, and the water we drink.

▲ **Incorporate personal responsibility as one of many influences***

Everyone should be able to make the choices that allow them to live a long, healthy life, regardless of their income, education or ethnic background.

What Not to Say

▼ **Physical health is the only way to better health**

Regular exercise is important to live a healthy lifestyle.

▼ **Weight is the end-goal of health**

Balance your calorie intake with physical activity to manage your weight.

▼ **Individuals are solely responsible**

Make the healthy choice the easy choice!

▼ **Specific groups are affected**

African Americans don't have the same opportunities to be as healthy as others.

▼ **Assuming everyone has equal/easy access**

You can live a healthy life by eating healthy, being physically active, and seeing your doctor regularly.

▼ **Using technical, public health terms**

There are many social, economic, and environmental factors that influence health.

▼ **Focusing on one social determinant only**

Low-income individuals are not able to live a long, healthy life due to poverty.

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* Example has been adapted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Report *A New Way to Talk About Social Determinants of Health*.

Additional Resources

[Association of Size Diversity and Health](#) – Health at Every Size Principles.

[National Wellness Institute](#) – About Wellness.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *A New Way to Talk About Social Determinants of Health*, 2010.

[World Health Organization](#).

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Nutrition & Food

Guiding Philosophy

Food nourishes our body and is meant to be enjoyed.

Food provides nutrients and calories that nourish and fuel the body. Food choices are a balance of fulfilling nutritional needs, hunger, taste/pleasure, culture, personal and family tradition. Promoting a healthy relationship with food allows people to choose foods that are both good for the body and bring enjoyment.

Effective messaging strategies

Food is meant to be enjoyed: People choose food for many different reasons, such as taste and health. You will reach more people and help build healthy relationships with food by using messages of how nutrient-dense food can be enjoyed. Pleasure-oriented messages focus on the enjoyment and taste of food, and can include emotional appeals regarding sharing a meal with family or friends, trying new foods, and the enjoyment of cooking a meal. Pleasure-oriented food messages improve both attitudes and intentions to eat healthy. In some cases, pleasure-oriented messages improved attitudes more than health-focused messages.

The goal is a healthy relationship with food: Health messages can help support a positive relationship with food. Focusing on what can be gained and enjoyed from eating a variety of foods allows people to see food from a positive perspective. Building a positive relationship with all food decreases the risk of unintentionally encouraging disordered eating practices.

Focus on the positive: Healthy eating strategies should be positive, encouraging, and focus on what is gained by eating certain foods. The majority of American adults want to know what to eat, not what to avoid. Positive messages can lead to higher motivation to eat healthy and are more appropriate for the general public.

Focus on intrinsic reasons to eat healthy: Promotional messages should focus on the inherent reasons to eat a variety of food, rather than external rewards. Such intrinsic messages can include the nutrients it provides, the health and energy it gives, feeling great about oneself, and how great it tastes.

All foods fit: People make food choices based on their needs, resources, desires, and culture. Up to 80% of adults state they do not want to give up their favorite foods. By promoting the message that all foods can fit within their diet, it can increase the likelihood that people see food from a positive perspective and are receptive to health education messages and interventions.

Use a variety of terms to describe “healthy” foods:

Using the term ‘healthy’ consistently can imply that some foods are unhealthy. Try using a variety of terms such as ‘nutritious,’ ‘good for the body,’ ‘full of vitamins and minerals,’ and ‘nourishing’ when describing nutrient-dense food.

Focus on food: People buy food, not nutrients. Promote the various reasons for eating a certain food, rather than only discussing the benefits of a particular nutrient.

Encourage healthy eating: Partner with your audience by encouraging healthy choices, rather than demanding

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Effective messaging strategies continued

it. Use terms such as ‘consider,’ ‘think about,’ or ‘try.’

Food environment matters: Accessibility, availability, and the price of food influence consumption and even health outcomes. Consider the food environment in which people live when making nutrition recommendations. When needed, describe the food environment (e.g., communities that lack access to fresh food) rather than using labels (e.g., food swamp, food desert).

Avoid these messaging strategies...

Framing healthy eating as something that must be endured for long-term goals at the expense of short-term enjoyment. There are long-term benefits of food, such as decreasing the risk of disease, as well as short-term benefits, such as decreasing hunger. People should not be asked to make sacrifices in their wellbeing or happiness for long-term health goals.

Talking about healthy eating from a ‘technical’ perspective, or a perspective that takes away from a positive, healthy relationship with food. This can include listing foods in terms of numbers or calories that must be ‘managed’ or foods that must be ‘balanced’ (either with physical activity or other foods).

Using negative messages that label certain foods/ beverages as ‘bad,’ or on what is lost by eating certain foods or food groups.

Citing external reasons for eating healthy, such as weight change, a thin/fit body type, or how others may feel/think about the person.

Discussing diets that must be ‘perfect,’ ‘clean,’ or in a manner that is all-or-nothing and does not allow people to purchase and consume food without guilt. Eating ‘clean’ implies that other foods are dirty or bad, which can lead to guilt and shame, decreasing someone’s likelihood of eating nutritious foods. While values such as buying food that is local, organic, ethical, etc. are important to some, it’s also important to allow flexibility and space for people to make food choices that fit within their lifestyle and available resources.

Using ‘unhealthy’ to describe certain foods or using the term ‘healthy’ consistently to discuss certain foods or a dietary pattern that does not include all foods.

Focusing solely on nutrients without connecting the nutrient to food. Not all people know the food sources of nutrients and may not know what foods to eat.

Using absolutes or demeaning/demanding words to promote eating habits such as ‘always,’ ‘never,’ or ‘should.’

Assuming easy access to food: Nutrient-dense foods are not available or accessible in all areas, and some people are not able to afford them even if they are available.

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What to Say

▲ **Food is meant to be enjoyed**

Shared meals nourish the mind and body. Ask your kids to help find a new recipe and cook it together as a family.

▲ **Healthy relationship with food**

There is no such thing as a perfect diet. You can eat food that is good for your body and you enjoy.

▲ **Focus on the positive**

There are many reasons to eat fruit. Fresh, canned, or frozen – they are good for your body, give you energy, and taste great.

▲ **Focus on intrinsic reasons**

Try starting your day with a bowl of oatmeal. It tastes great and gives your body the energy it needs for a busy day.

▲ **All foods fit**

All foods fit within your diet. You can make food choices that honor your health and taste buds.

▲ **Use a variety of terms**

Try a glass of milk with lunch. It's good for your body and an easy way to get more calcium for bone health.

▲ **Focus on food**

Using oil when cooking can lower your risk of heart disease.

▲ **Encourage healthy eating**

Consider whole wheat bread with your next sandwich.

▲ **Food environment matters**

If you live in a community without a grocery store, these resources can help you get affordable, fresh food.

What Not to Say

▼ **Framing healthy eating as unenjoyable**

Vegetables may not always taste great, but they are worth it for your health.

▼ **A technical perspective**

Snack on celery and other vegetables. They are low in calories and can help with weight loss.

▼ **Focusing on the negative**

Cut down on soda. Adults who drink soda daily are more likely to be overweight.

▼ **Focusing on external reasons**

Eat high-fiber foods like oatmeal to help manage your weight.

▼ **A 'perfect' or 'clean' diet**

Eat clean by avoiding sugary snacks and choosing vegetables instead.

▼ **Using the term 'unhealthy'**

Whole milk is unhealthy and high in fat. Choose 1% or fat free milk, it's healthy and a good source of calcium.

▼ **Focusing on nutrients alone**

Unsaturated fat can lower your risk of heart disease.

▼ **Absolute/demeaning approaches**

Always choose whole wheat bread instead of white bread to meet your fiber needs.

▼ **Assuming easy access to food**

It's easy to eat more fruit! Pick up a banana next time you are at the store.

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Additional Resources

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) – Gateway to Health Communication & Social Marketing Practice.
[PlainLanguage.gov](#).

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Physical Activity and Fitness

Guiding Philosophy

Physical activity is meant to be enjoyed and improves quality of life.

There are many ways to be physically active, and any type of movement counts. Promoting physical activity in a way that makes it safe, enjoyable, and culturally-relevant ensures a positive experience that will help people be more active. There are many benefits of being active, including improving both mental and physical health.

Effective messaging strategies

There are various benefits: There are many reasons to be active, such as better sleep, lower blood pressure, improved blood sugar levels, prevention of chronic disease, lower risk of depression and anxiety, time for self-care, and an increase in energy. When describing the benefits of physical activity, be sure to talk about all of the different types of benefits.

Weight/body-inclusive activity: People who are more active may see health improvements but may not see a lasting change in weight. Being active can happen at all sizes, and overall fitness levels are a better predictor of health than body weight. Physical activity messages that promote weight loss or a 'fit body' are not as well received by the public as those that focus on other reasons to be more active.

All movement counts: Any type and amount of movement is better than no movement. Even small amounts of low intensity activity are beneficial. Being active should be enjoyable and at an intensity that is appropriate for each person. Not everyone is physically able to do moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, and messages that stress this level of activity as the only beneficial activity can alienate some people.

Keep environment in mind: A safe and comfortable environment is important for people to be physically active. Unfortunately, not everyone has access to a safe and/or comfortable living or community environment. It's important to keep in mind all types of living and community conditions when promoting physical activity and what is realistic for your audience.

Focus on what can be gained: There are many benefits of being physically active, and messages should promote what can be gained from any type of movement, rather than the health risks of inactivity.

Being active is possible at all fitness levels. Promoting activity as something that is possible at all levels, such as walking with a friend or playing with children, allows people to see physical activity as something they can enjoy and fit into their normal routine.

Fit physical activity in with other life goals: Everyone has unique life goals, and messages that incorporate physical activity as a way to help meet other life goals (e.g., time with family and friends, having energy for job/work) can be very effective.

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Avoid these messaging strategies...

Be active for your health (as the only reason): Not everyone is focused on their health, so it's important to not discuss health as the only reason to be active. Promoting activity as a way to help meet other life goals (e.g., time with family), time for self-care, improved sleep, decreased stress, or increased energy can help reach those who are not concerned about disease prevention.

Weight-focused reasons to be active, such as weight loss, weight maintenance, or a 'fit' body type. Research does not support physical activity being an effective strategy for long-term weight loss. Also, people often have negative reactions to physical activity messages that focus on weight.

People must meet national recommendations for physical activity: The benefits of physical activity start at intensity levels and amounts of time much lower than the national recommendations. For those who are inactive, the national recommendations can seem very overwhelming. Any type of movement is better than no movement.

Assuming a safe environment for physical activity: Not all people feel safe or comfortable being active outside of their home and may not be able to afford going to safe places such as the gym. In many neighborhoods, being active is not easy. It's important to keep your audience's living and community environment in mind when promoting activity.

What is lost by not being active: Loss-framed messages that focus on what bad things can happen when people are inactive are not as well-received by the public as messages that focus on what is gained by being active.

Physical activity must be difficult to be effective: A common barrier to being more active is the idea that being physically active is 'hard' or 'complicated.' Many people also think you must do exercises at a gym to be 'active.' Promoting physical activity as possible at all fitness levels and in ways people can enjoy (e.g., walking the dog, playing at a park with family) helps reframe activity in a way people can relate to.

Being active should be its own goal: People face many challenges in life, and sometimes those challenges can make it difficult to dedicate additional time for physical activity in their daily life. Fitting activity in with other life goals is one way to help people be more active. For example, if someone works long hours, setting aside family time can be very important to them. Fitting activity into that family time is one way that allows people to be more active while also meeting other goals.

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What to Say

▲ **There are various benefits**

A dance party with your family is a fun way to spend time with your loved ones and can help you sleep better that night.

▲ **Weight/body-inclusive activity**

Walking regularly can increase energy levels and decrease stress.

▲ **All movement counts**

Any movement is better than no movement! All types of activity, including walking, swimming, and even gardening, count.

▲ **Keep environment in mind**

There are many places you can be active, such as stretching in your home, taking a class at a local community center, or a hike with a friend.

▲ **Focus on what can be gained**

Being active can decrease your risk of diabetes and heart disease.

▲ **Physical activity is possible at all levels**

Walking with your family, taking the stairs, or playing with pets all count towards living an active lifestyle.

▲ **Fit activity with other life goals**

Yoga or stretching at home in the morning can clear your head and give you the energy you need for a busy day.

What Not to Say

▼ **Be active for your health (only)**

Take a 10 minute walk daily – your health depends on it!

▼ **Weight-focused reasons**

Walking regularly can help you manage your weight.

▼ **People must meet national recommendations**

Aim for 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per week for a healthy lifestyle.

▼ **Assuming a safe environment**

It's easy to be active! Try going for a quick jog at your local park.

▼ **What is lost by not being active**

Sitting too much can increase your risk of diabetes and heart disease.

▼ **Physical activity must be difficult**

Strive for moderate to vigorous intensity activity where your heart rate is higher and you break a sweat.

▼ **Being active should be its own goal**

Make physical activity a priority for your health and aim to be active most days of the week.

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Weight and Body Size

Guiding Philosophy

All bodies are good bodies.

There are inherent differences in body shapes and sizes, and all bodies deserve respect. Many factors influence health other than weight, such as genetics, community food environment, gut microbiome, early childhood, sleep patterns, and socioeconomic status—to name a few. A focus on low body weight can lead to weight stigma, disordered eating, and negative health outcomes.

💬 Effective messaging strategies

Health is weight-neutral: The relationship between health and body weight is complex. While a higher body weight is associated with some diseases, it does not cause disease. Genetics, lifestyle patterns, aerobic fitness, social determinants of health, and mental health play a significant role in preventing disease and are better predictors of health outcomes than body weight/BMI. Pursuing a healthy lifestyle can happen at all body weights.

Appreciate and care for your body: How people feel about their body matters and promoting wellbeing and self-love at all body shapes and sizes is important for overall wellness. People who love their body are less likely to yo-yo diet and are more likely to be physically active compared with those who are dissatisfied with their body.

Focus on lifestyle behaviors: When people focus on eating a variety of healthy foods, being more active, and managing their stress, their mental and physical health can improve—even if their weight doesn't change. Focusing on lifestyle behaviors allows people to enhance their wellbeing without the stress of weight loss.

All bodies deserve respectful care: Every person, regardless of body size, deserves compassion and respect. It is important to create an environment in which all bodies feel welcome. This includes using photos of people of all body shapes being physically active, eating nourishing foods, and having a good time; using seating and medical devices/equipment that can accommodate larger bodies; and developing health initiatives that focus on lifestyle behaviors instead of body weight (e.g., wellness programs that focus on daily steps instead of weight loss).

There are many factors that influence body weight, shape, and size: While individual behaviors play a role to some degree, there are many factors that influence weight. Taking the focus off of weight allows people to approach their health in a positive way.

✗ Avoid these messaging strategies...

Health occurs at a 'normal' BMI: There are many people within the 'normal' BMI range that have high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, heart disease, etc. When weight loss and a certain BMI are end-goals in health, people can use unhealthy lifestyle measures such as yo-yo dieting and restrictive eating to meet that goal. And, most people who lose weight will regain it (and more) over time.

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Avoid these messaging strategies continued

Aim for a 'fit' body: Promoting a certain type of body shape/size can lead to weight stigma and weight bias. Stigmatizing or shaming people in larger bodies does not result in weight loss; in fact, it is associated with weight gain and poor mental and physical health outcomes. Instead, promote positive lifestyle behaviors for all bodies.

Focus on weight loss: The majority of individuals who lose weight are unable to keep the weight off long term. Focusing on changing body weight and size can also negatively impact mental health and promote disordered eating. Promoting lifestyle behaviors such as adequate sleep, stress management, physical activity, and eating nourishing foods allows people to live a healthy life at any size.

Messages that contribute to weight stigma: Messages that shame higher body weights or larger body sizes are not well received by the public and are harmful. To help end weight stigma, avoid the following: using photos of larger bodies with images of unhealthy lifestyle behaviors; using terms or phrases that have negative connotations with weight (e.g., flab, chubby); wellness competitions that reward weight loss as a goal.

Eat less and exercise more: Due to differences in genetics and metabolism, calorie restriction combined with calorie expenditure does not always result in weight loss in the long run. Instead, support people in developing healthy eating and physical activity patterns that are practical, sustainable, and do not result in feelings of deprivation, hunger, and stress.

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What to Say

▲ **Health is weight-neutral**

Honor your body with nourishing food and movement that gives you energy, so you can do all the things that are important in your life.

▲ **Love your body**

Love and accept your body just the way it is and take good care of it.

▲ **Focus on lifestyle behaviors**

Nourish your body with fruits and vegetables.

▲ **All bodies deserve respectful care**

A number on a scale doesn't define you.

▲ **There are many factors that influence weight**

Ditch the scale - Focus on taking care of yourself and adopting positive changes that make you feel good.

What Not to Say

▼ **Health occurs at a 'normal' BMI**

Aim for a healthy weight to decrease your risk of chronic disease.

▼ **Aim for a 'fit' body**

Don't drink yourself fat. Cut back on soda and other sugary beverages.*

▼ **Focus on weight loss**

Snacking on vegetables can help you lose weight.

▼ **Messages that contribute to weight stigma**

Ditch the flab by walking daily.

▼ **Eat less and exercise more**

Eat less and move more for a healthy weight.

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* Message used by the New York Department of Health, *Pouring on the Pounds* campaign

Additional Resources

[Association for Size Diversity and Health.](#)

[Health at Every Size.](#)

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Disordered Eating and Diet Culture

Guiding Philosophy

The road to wellbeing is paved with a healthy relationship with food and self.

A healthy relationship with food improves dietary behaviors, health, and wellbeing. By promoting ‘all bodies are good bodies’ and ‘all foods are good foods,’ we can help lower the risk of body dissatisfaction, restrictive eating, chronic dieting, and disordered eating.

Important definitions

Disordered Eating

A spectrum of irregular and unhealthy eating behaviors that can impact mental and physical health. Examples of disordered eating include frequent dieting, feelings of guilt/shame when eating, restricting intake, a preoccupation with food and/or body weight, and using exercise, fasting, or purging to ‘make up’ for consuming certain foods.

Eating Disorders

Diagnosable, psychological disorders characterized by abnormal or disturbed eating. Examples include anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.

Diet Culture

A value system that prioritizes a certain size, weight, and shape over health and/or promotes the idea that thinness is equal to health.

Effective messaging strategies

All foods are good foods: When foods are labeled as ‘good’ or ‘better,’ that implies that others are ‘bad’ or ‘worse’ and should, therefore, be restricted. Restrictive eating is a major risk factor for disordered eating, so messages should promote a healthy relationship with food where no foods are restricted.

Evidence-based nutrition strategies to support long-term health and a healthy relationship with food. Practices such as ‘detoxing,’ ‘eating clean,’ or ‘eating alkaline’ are not supported by research. To maintain a consistent, clear message, only evidence-based strategies should be used.

Eating patterns that fit within someone’s lifestyle

long-term: The most effective dietary changes occur when they are practical, realistic, and fit within someone’s lifestyle. Restrictive diets have not been found to be effective long-term and increase the risk for disordered eating, chronic dieting, and poor mental and physical health outcomes.

Healthy lives lead to healthy bodies: Healthy lifestyle behaviors such as eating nutritious foods, being active in ways that are enjoyable, managing stress, and getting enough sleep are vital for health and decrease the risk of chronic disease. Focusing on these behaviors, rather than on an end goal such as weight, allows people to develop a healthy relationship with their body.

Promote intuitive approaches to eating: Intuitive eating approaches are associated with physical health improvements, including blood pressure, cholesterol, and

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Effective messaging strategies continued

inflammatory markers, and mental health benefits such as improved self-esteem, body acceptance, satisfaction with life, optimism, and positive affect. Intuitive eating approaches can vary, but generally include: 1) permission to eat food (no restrictive eating), 2) eating for physical rather than emotional reasons, and 3) relying on hunger and satiety cues to start and stop eating.

Avoid these messaging strategies...

Discussing dietary patterns that disallow/limit/restrict foods or food groups: When certain foods or food groups are given a moral value such as ‘bad’ or ‘toxic,’ people may feel the need to restrict those foods, feel deprived, and then feel guilt or shame when eating them. The cycle of eating, feeling guilty, and then deprivation can lead to disordered eating practices.

‘Popular’ but unscientific strategies such as eating ‘clean,’ ‘detoxing,’ or ‘fasting’ etc. Eating ‘clean’ implies that other foods are dirty or bad, which can lead to guilt and shame. The kidneys and liver filter blood, so dietary ‘detoxes’ are not necessary, and can even cause harm. While the use of these terms is popular, it is important to stay evidence-based when promoting nutrition and food.

Short-term diets: Diets intended to be temporary do not provide long-term health improvements and can set up a process of chronic dieting and weight cycling.

Weight loss/maintenance leads to healthy bodies: Weight-loss diets have not been proven to be successful long-term. Also, when a certain weight becomes the goal, many people turn to unhealthy weight loss strategies to achieve that goal such as fasting, skipping meals, restricting intake, purging, and over exercising.

An ‘ideal’ weight goal also implies that weights above that are not ideal, leading to shame, body dissatisfaction, and weight stigma. Similar to restrictive eating, body dissatisfaction is a major risk factor for disordered eating.

Promote a ‘controlled’ strategy of eating that includes limiting certain foods/food groups, balancing calories ‘in’ with calories ‘out,’ and restricting calories to manage/lose weight. Limiting calories, foods, or food groups (e.g., fat, carbohydrates) is a form of restrictive eating, which can then lead to disordered eating and chronic dieting.

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What to Say

▲ **All foods are good foods**

The only bad foods are rotten foods! Make peace with food and enjoy foods that nourish your body and taste great.

▲ **Evidence-based nutrition strategies**

Here are 5 easy ways to eat more vegetables.

▲ **Eating patterns that fit within someone's lifestyle**

Say no to diets! Choose foods that honor your health and fit within your lifestyle.

▲ **Healthy lives lead to healthy bodies**

Take care of your mind and body for overall health.

▲ **Promote intuitive approaches to eating**

Recognize your hunger and respect your fullness. Feed your body when hungry and listen to your body to tell you when you're full.

What Not to Say

▼ **Foods are disallowed/limited/restricted**

You should limit your intake of saturated fat found in butter and meat to prevent heart disease.

▼ **'Popular' but unscientific strategies**

Overindulge last weekend? Detox this week with these 5 vegetables.

▼ **Short-term diets**

If you cut 500 calories per day, you can lose 5 pounds in one month.

▼ **Weight loss/maintenance leads to healthy bodies**

Reaching and maintaining a healthy weight is important for overall health.

▼ **Promote a 'controlled' strategy of eating**

Control your calories to manage your weight; balance the calories you eat with the calories you expend.

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Additional Resources

[National Eating Disorder Association](#) – Tips for Responsible Media Coverage.

[Quartz.com](#) – There's a Better Way to Cover Diet, Fitness, and Health.

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