Six Ways to Boost Public Support for Prevention-Based Policy

by Nat Kendall-Taylor & Nicky Hawkins July 31, 2019

Communications strategies for advocates, activists, and researchers who want to build support for preventative approaches to solving social problems.

Societies around the world struggle to pass preventative social and environmental policies that keep people safer and healthier, both in the moment and into the future. More times than not, prevention takes a back seat to dealing with problems that have already taken shape. Take the opioid epidemic. In the United States, more than 130 people die each day from opioid overdoses. We can trace many of these deaths back to unsafe practices around prescribing opioids to deal with chronic pain. When someone is suffering from an overdose, the drug naloxone can keep them alive. The public seems to be behind naloxone and supportive of making it more widely available. But many seem much less supportive, even actively opposed to, calls to change the medical system and pharmaceutical industry to *prevent* addiction, including through limiting the course of opioid prescriptions, requiring more-robust physician training, changing the way companies market opioids, or using non-opioid alternatives to pain management. If more people supported these changes, it would help stop addiction before it starts.

The problem isn't that people think taking actions like improving physician training aren't worthwhile; rather, such actions don't always seem relevant or necessary to addressing the issue at hand. This is because of the predictable and automatic cognitive responses that shape our thinking and, without us knowing it, make it hard for us to think longer term about preventive solutions. The present—what is right in front of us and what we can change right now—is potent and tangible; it demands our attention. By contrast, the future is nebulous, difficult to get a handle on, and easy to put out of mind.

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Why We Find It Hard to Engage With the Future

One unconscious cognitive response that's difficult to overcome is "normalcy bias"—the human tendency to assume things will persist in their current state and continue as they are. This is a major challenge for those working on risk communication and disaster preparedness; if people assume the current state of things will persist, it's hard to get them to prepare for a different future. Another unconscious cognitive response, called "delay discounting," is the tendency for people to take less of a payoff now rather than waiting to receive more later.

Widely shared cultural beliefs support these tendencies and fuel inaction. "Declinism" is the unmotivating belief that the future is a dark and dismal place, compared to the rosy past and pleasant present. This stems from many people's tendency toward nostalgia, which is nourished by the stories we hear and read every day in the media and popular culture about issues like education, technology, crime and community. Declinism is connected to widespread fatalism—the idea that nothing can be done because problems are too awful, deeply embedded, and numerous. Human cognition is frugal, and fatalism offers an easy-out when the solution to a problem is too abstract, complicated, overwhelming, or long-term. Research on child abuse and neglect, for example, shows that people often overestimate the scale of the problem and underestimate society's ability to tackle it.

The widely held idea that social problems are the result of individual decisions also makes prevention hard to think about and difficult to get behind. After all, how can we prevent others from making poor decisions?

At the FrameWorks Institute, which uses social science research to help solve communications challenges, we've scrutinized the psychological and cultural roots of this "prevention paradox," while designing and testing communications strategies to overcome it. Here are six strategies that advocates, activists, researchers, and nonprofits can use to help build greater public support for prevention policies.

1. Connect Action Now With Outcomes Later

Those working for social change need to make it easy and automatic for people to connect today's actions with tomorrow's consequences. This is vital to countering our human tendencies to undervalue tomorrow's rewards and see future outcomes as impossibly removed from anything we do today.

The early childhood development field has used this approach to make experiences from birth to age four synonymous with future learning, health, and wellbeing. Beginning in 2003, it adopted the active, metaphorical language of "building" brains to highlight the long-term value of positive relationships, supports, and experiences during the first few years of a child's life. Campaigns and initiatives from Tennessee to Alberta have successfully advocated for policy and practice change. In Tennessee, this strategy resulted in an annual, 2.5-million-dollar program that seeks to reduce early childhood adversity from a range of sources—including abuse, neglect, poverty, and housing—in order to improve health, learning, and behavior outcomes for children across the state. This preventative approach has correlated with improvements in a range of state-level, child-wellbeing indicators, including a reduction in the number of children living in poverty and without health insurance. Over time, a variety of campaigns connecting the now and later have changed public appetite for policies and programs that support early development.

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2. Prime Legacy Thinking

Organizations can also prime legacy thinking—the desire to leave behind something positive and meaningful—to help overcome people's tendency to focus exclusively on the here and now. Communications research on environmental issues has shown that tapping into people's desire to have a positive impact on future generations can prompt them to act in the near-term. For example, when asked to think and write about what they wanted future generations to remember them by, people were significantly more willing to engage in actions to solve climate change and more likely to donate to environmental organizations than people who were not asked to think about their legacy.

3. Put More Focus on Solutions

To counter fatalism and generate more engagement, advocates, activists, researchers, and nonprofits need to spend as much time emphasizing solutions as they do outlining problems. We need to lead with concrete and relatable examples of what solutions look like, how they work, and what they can do.

Public health advocates and anti-tobacco campaigners in the United Kingdom successfully applied this strategy in the early 2000s. Rather than continuing to raise awareness of the dangers of smoking, they put a preventative solution center stage: a ban on smoking in public places. Politicians strongly opposed the initiative at first, but over time, through well-framed public communications, advocates changed how they perceived smoke-free legislation, moving the idea from "extreme" to a "historic piece of legislation" in less than three years.

4. Don't Rely on Probabilities

For many people, probability statistics are just numbers on a page; they can feel meaningless and irrelevant to our day-to-day lives. Even when we need to do something today to decrease the probability of something bad happening tomorrow or to increase the probability of a good outcome, many of us struggle to reason productively about probability, especially when it comes to rating the likelihood of something bad affecting us personally. Terrifying projections—such as 10 million people will die due to the overuse of antibiotics—don't drive action and support for change. What's more, even highly numerate individuals often dismiss or misinterpret data that doesn't fit their existing views. In fact, research suggests that better numeracy skills actually makes it *more* likely that someone will inaccurately interpret or distort data to confirm their beliefs.

A better strategy is to explain how statistics work. For example, Frameworks compared the effects of explaining how structural racism creates patterns of concentrated poverty with the effects of asserting that there is a connection. The former led to twice as much policy support for progressive equity policies—in this case, requirements for developers to set aside affordable housing and multi-family homes in all new developments.

5. Show Context

By explaining the contexts that shape lives and decision-making, communicators can avoid getting stuck in the idea that social problems are a result of bad individual decision-making and are thus unsolvable.

For example, FrameWorks has been working with hundreds of experts and advocates across the United Kingdom to communicate the causes of poverty and how to solve it. Our strategy, spearheaded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, involves telling a story focused on the circumstances that lock people into poverty and out of opportunities. The idea is to make the context

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and external factors that lead to poverty an inescapable part of people's mental picture of the issue. The campaign has not only improved the quality of the media debate around the issue, but also increased the quantity of media coverage by 25 percent.

6. Move Beyond Consumerism

Finally, advocates, activists, researchers, and nonprofits need to move people away from expecting an immediate return on investment—a mindset that's come to pervade public thinking about social solutions. This expectation makes prevention hard to think about, because the "payoff" is frequently far removed. What's more, successful investments in prevention result, by definition, in the absence of a visible problem.

FrameWorks research in the United States, for example, has examined underlying assumptions Americans have about budgets and taxes, with the aim of developing more-productive ways to communicate the value of financial planning. Most people want to see the value of the taxes they pay delivered immediately and in kind—in the services they receive from the government. Our research showed that it was necessary to address both the idea of *who* receives the benefit of taxes—shifting from "you" to "we"—and the *time* it takes to see the return on investment—from "now" to "down the line"—to move people to more preventative perspectives. The idea of taxes being a forward exchange made people more willing to support long-term, preventative public policies on issues like education, criminal justice, infrastructure, and human services.

Addressing massive challenges like climate change and poverty requires that we take a long-term view and have a preventative mindset. Since these perspectives challenge the deeply ingrained ways we have evolved to think and behave, we need to pay attention to why prevention is hard to think about and navigate the cognitive road blocks that stand in the way of progress. By presenting issues and information in ways that unlock support for preventative approaches, we can galvanize the ideas and actions social and environmental change requires.

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