



Getting attention for prevention

Guidelines for effective communication about preventing sexual violence

A framing brief developed by:

berkeley **media** studiesgroup



It can be difficult to convey that
sexual violence is preventable
and to illustrate what prevention can look like.

The way we communicate about sexual violence can make a big difference in how our intended audience understands
the problem and what to do about it.

With an issue so big and seemingly intractable, it can be tempting to focus solely on driving home the scope of the problem. We need to talk about what to do about it — not just after the fact, but also what needs to happen to prevent abuse and assault in the first place.

We know from opinion research that people are hungry to learn more about what prevention looks like in concrete, measurable terms. How will you illustrate that preventing sexual violence is possible and that there are tangible steps your audience can take to get there? Here we explore the nuances of framing sexual violence and provide building blocks for constructing messages about prevention.

SHIFT FROM PORTRAIT TO LANDSCAPE

Communication is not just about what we say or how we say it.

Persuasive messages emerge from an overall strategy — the change we want to see in the world and how we think it will happen. In other words, message is never first: Messages about preventing sexual assault will derive from the specific policies, programs, systems or cultural changes we want to put in place.

Messages, then, must be considered in tandem with who will deliver them (messengers) and to whom they will be delivered (specific audiences). Messages don't exist in a vacuum; in addition to being connected to specific strategies, messages are delivered in political and cultural contexts that can influence how they are understood. That's why messages have to be fluid — developed from strategy (which changes), delivered by messengers (who change) to a target audience (which might also change) in a specific context (also in flux).

Framing is the process our minds use to recognize patterns of ideas, categorize them and make meaning from them. Framing is powerful — sometimes, all it takes is a single word or image to activate an entire frame. Once they are activated, frames can trigger emotions, associations, values, judgments and causal explanations. Frames create tracks for a train of thought that can be difficult to shift or derail.

How do we construct a persuasive message about preventing sexual assault amidst all this motion?

By framing them effectively.

A dominant frame that pervades life in the U.S. is that of “personal responsibility”: In other words, the idea that individual actions — like alcohol intake, choice of clothing, pornography use, personal morals or spending time with the “right kind of people” — outweigh any other factors in acts of sexual assault. The dominant frame is like a portrait that focuses on individuals and their actions. When it comes to sexual violence, the default frame keeps the focus on individual victims, perpetrators and incidents of assault or abuse.

That narrow focus can obscure the environments that surround us. In the case of sexual violence, the frame can hide the policies and institutions (like college campuses, youth-serving organizations and others) that can foster a climate where sexual violence happens. It can also obscure what can be changed in those institutions to promote prevention.

Effective prevention messages need to broaden the default landscape perspective to make visible the external factors that can shape sexual violence outcomes. By painting a broader picture, we can help people see how, for example, institutional policies, cultural norms or historical contexts can normalize sexual violence or make it seem inevitable. With that landscape view, the policy, environmental and systemic strategies that can prevent assault and abuse will make sense to people.

For more information on framing: <http://www.bmsg.org/resources/framing-101>

ARTICULATE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE

People are more likely to embrace the possibility of prevention

when they see concrete examples of prevention approaches in action, whether that is in schools, on university campuses, in youth-serving organizations or elsewhere.

Those kinds of concrete strategies and tactics are crucial for helping people realize that prevention is possible and inspiring them to become part of it.



Your message should be connected to the prevention strategy you are seeking in the near term, even though you may support a broad range of approaches. Your message is specific enough if it is able to answer the 5 Ws (though you won't necessarily need to include all five in every message):

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Who should take action?

What should they do?

When should they do it?

Where will it happen?

Why is this the right approach?

For example, if you want to effect change on a college campus, it might be that the Office of the Provost needs to take action to develop and administer campus climate surveys before the next class of students is admitted. The messenger could explain that such surveys would help identify prevention priorities that would ultimately benefit every incoming student and would demonstrate the school's commitment to safety.

ELEVATE YOUR VALUES

We have to say why prevention matters, in addition to

illustrating the scope of the problem and highlighting concrete solutions. An effective message goes beyond facts and figures to connect with people on the level of their deeply held values — the principles and standards that guide how they think the world should work.

Research has shown that most people respond best to messages that evoke shared values. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff describes the importance of values within three conceptual levels of understanding² (see Figure 1).

Values are the foundation of the message and frame so we prioritize them at level one. Level two articulates the issue area — sexual violence, in this case. Level three is about the details of your approach.

All three levels are important and necessary, but it's easy to get stuck at level three, mired in minutiae. Inundating people with facts and figures is unlikely to shift people's thinking, especially if those facts are out of sync with their underlying beliefs. Voicing shared values helps people connect with prevention and recognize its importance. Ultimately, values are what motivate people to act.



Figure 1. Conceptual levels

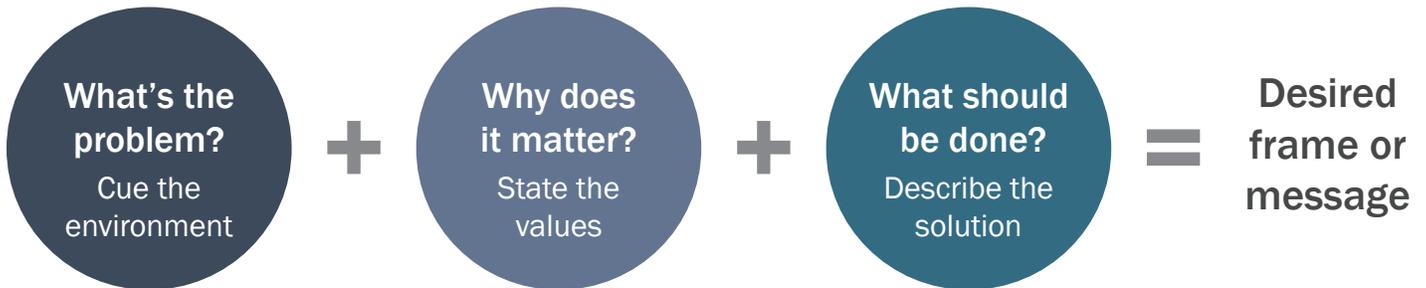


What are the core values that motivate your work?

Message testing indicates that shared values that could activate support for sexual violence prevention include:

- interconnectedness
- hope
- safety
- cultivating the next generation
- importance of education
- respect
- dignity
- building community

Constructing effective messages about any issue requires answering three basic questions:



The answers to these questions should evoke up the landscape so the audience can see the context for the problem and the possibility of the solution. Otherwise, the default portrait frame will kick in and obscure the discussion of larger systems change. The description of the problem in terms of the environment can then connect to the values that motivate action.

Naming the solution helps the audience see that despite the complexity of the problem, there is something we can do about it. And whatever the solution you name, it should connect with shared values that can help illustrate why that approach is the best one and move the conversation toward prevention. Here's an example:

What is the problem?

More than 10 million children participate in after-school programs every year,³ but not all of them are safe places.

Why does it matter?

When one in ten kids experience sexual assault before they are 18,⁴ it's our responsibility and our moral imperative as adults to protect the children who are the future of this country.

What should be done?

That's why it's so important to support after-school programs in their efforts to prevent sexual abuse or exploitation. We can do that with increased staff screening and training. Helping those programs improve from the inside out will reach children all over the nation and build a future in which every child is safe from sexual violence wherever they are.

Energizing and activating people around sexual violence prevention can feel daunting, but when we illustrate the environment, describe solutions and articulate why prevention matters, we can make the case we want: Prevention is possible, and all of us have a stake in building and maintaining safe, stable, thriving communities free from sexual violence.

Acknowledgments

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¹ Crockett Z. (2016, October 24). Six charts that will change how you think about sexual assault in America. VOX. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/identities/2016/10/24/13352100/sexual-assault-america-charts>. Accessed July 24, 2017.

² Dorfman L., Wallack L., & Woodruff K. (2005). More than a message: Framing public health advocacy to change corporate practices. *Health Education & Behavior*; 32, 320-336. doi:10.1177/1090198105275046

³ Afterschool Alliance. (2014). *America after 3PM: Afterschool programs in demand*. Retrieved from http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM-2014/AA3PM_National_Report.pdf

⁴ Darkness to Light. (2015). *Child sexual abuse statistics: The magnitude of the problem*. Retrieved from https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Statistics_1_Magnitude.pdf. Accessed July 28, 2017.