

Key Framing Guides

Key Points

The five key points discussed below model examples of how you might apply these research findings to your own communications. Use this list as a guide when developing anything from executive summaries to blog posts to quotes for a press release.

1 Emphasize the value of *Justice*.

The value of *Justice*—the principle that all people, regardless of age, deserve equal opportunity and fair treatment—appeals to the cherished American principle that “all people are created equal.” It asserts our belief that people should live free of abuse and neglect and be able to participate fully in society as we age. FrameWorks research finds that framing a message with this value helps people understand elder abuse as a societal problem, promotes a sense of collective responsibility for addressing it, and boosts support for policies to prevent it.

Framing tip: Because appeals to values establish why an issue is a matter of public concern, they work especially well at the start of a message, where they can prime people to listen more productively to the information that follows. Here’s an example of how you can build the *Justice* value into your messages:

In the United States of America, we believe in justice for all. We promise to uphold this value when we recite our national pledge of allegiance in schools, legislatures, and other settings. Yet we sometimes fail to live up to this promise. In our country, we do not have systems in place to allow us to stay involved in our communities as we age, which can lead to isolation, neglect, and elder abuse. We can create a more just society for all people—regardless of age—with policies and programs that help us stay connected to our families, friends, and loved ones and enable us to participate in our communities at all points in our lives.

2 Compare society to a building.

Americans understand elder abuse in individualistic terms. They tend to attribute responsibility for elder abuse solely to individuals and to perceive that only individuals are affected by it. This individualistic way of thinking precludes people from seeing how larger social forces create conditions that foster elder abuse, making it a social problem that requires societal solutions.

The **Social Structure** explanatory metaphor, which compares society to a building, helps people understand the societal and structural causes and consequences of elder abuse and the need for systemic solutions.

Our society is like a building: If the foundation and structure are strong and stable, the people inside can go about their daily lives free from harm or worry. If the foundation is weak, or if support beams aren't in place or need repair, then people inside aren't secure. Currently, our social structure isn't as strong as it should be, especially for older people. We need social supports and reinforcements to ensure that we can all participate in society and live free of neglect and abuse as we age.

③ Embed individual stories into larger narratives.

Advocates use individual stories about victims of elder abuse to raise awareness, increase public concern, and connect with audiences on a deep, emotional level. When used in isolation, however, individual stories about victims activate people's default understanding of elder abuse as a problem that requires individualistic rather than systemic solutions (e.g., behavior change rather than policy change).

Our research finds that embedding an individual story in a larger narrative about elder abuse—one that also explains its system-level causes, consequences, and solutions—is most effective. See the complete narrative below for an example of how to wrap individual stories in a “big picture” narrative that offers people a wide-angle view of elder abuse as a social, rather than an individual, problem.

④ Build strong “explanatory chains” that link the causes and consequences of elder abuse.

Most people are not familiar with the term “elder abuse” and do not think of it as a major social problem. It is, in FrameWorks’ parlance, a “cognitive hole.” When introduced to the term, however, people *are* concerned about the problem it represents—but they struggle to understand how and why it happens, who it affects, and what to do about it as a society.

FrameWorks research finds that explanatory chains—step-by-step logic sequences that link the causes of a social problem to its causes—help the public understand what elder abuse is, understand the need for societal solutions, and believe in our collective ability to address it. The example below uses an explanatory chain to connect the issue of public transportation to the occurrence of elder abuse, but this framing strategy works for any issue related to aging and elder abuse. Note how each sentence builds on the one before it to link cause to effect in a simple, easy-to-follow way:

Most of us, at some point in our lives, will lose our ability to drive. If we live alone, we may not be able to get to the grocery store, the doctor's office, or the community center, and we will be at greater risk of isolation, neglect, and abuse. After all, if we don't interact regularly with friends, neighbors, and loved ones, who will notice if we experience abuse or neglect—and who will help us recover and get support when we need it?

Social supports can help. When we have access to public transportation, we can get the supplies, services, and socialization we need to thrive. We need policies to ensure that we all have access to safe and reliable transportation—regardless of our age—so we can reduce social isolation and help prevent elder abuse and neglect.

5 Tell the whole story.

For maximum effectiveness, tell a complete story about elder abuse that incorporates the aforementioned elements. FrameWorks refers to this overarching story—or meta-narrative—as the **Structure of Justice** narrative. In this story,

- Emphasize the value of **Justice** to help people understand why elder abuse is an important *social* issue.
- Use the **Social Structure** explanatory metaphor to help people understand how the issue works.
- Use an individual case to connect with audiences.
- And conclude with an explanation that links the causes and consequences of elder abuse to solutions. An example follows:

In our country, we pride ourselves on justice. But we don't always live up to this ideal—even though sculptures and paintings of a blindfolded "Lady Justice" remind us of it in our courtrooms, schools, and government buildings. In our society, older people, for example, are often isolated and alone, which increases the likelihood of neglect and abuse.

We can create a more just society for all people—regardless of our age—by building a stronger social structure. Society is like a building; we can strengthen ours with systems that integrate us into our communities and safeguard us as we age. Without these kinds of supports, we will likely experience social isolation, and perhaps abuse or neglect, as we age.

Angela, an 88-year-old woman with mobility challenges, reminds us why we need strong support beams for older people. Angela lives alone in a home she owns, and until a few months ago, when she fell and needed hip surgery, she was an active part of her community. Since then, however, her mobility has been limited and her pain medication sometimes compromises her memory and speech. As a result, she does not go out much and her social life is greatly diminished. Her younger sister, who lives several towns over,

relies on Angela's middle-aged neighbor, Bill, to check on her in between her own weekly visits. Bill has voluntarily helped Angela with odd jobs around her house for years, but their relationship has changed since he lost his job a year ago and has begun drinking heavily. Recently, he has been stopping by more frequently, doing yardwork and minor repairs that Angela has not requested, then demanding that Angela pay him for his time. His demeanor towards her has become threatening and verbally abusive. Angela's chronic pain and its effects are making it more difficult for Angela to be firm with Bill, but she does not want her sister to worry about her and does not know how to handle the situation safely. Lately, she has begun to withdraw, keeping her curtains closed and ignoring phone calls in order to avoid Bill's intimidation tactics.

We can prevent situations like Angela's by creating policies and programs that make it easier for older people to remain connected to their communities even when their health needs change and that ensure they have the necessary support structures to age in place. For example, we can increase the availability of neighborhood programs that decrease people's social isolation, and we can prioritize better transit options for people with mobility challenges. Making changes like these can allow people to more easily maintain the social relationships that help to prevent abusive behaviors from going unnoticed and unchecked. If we build a stronger social structure around older people, we can reduce isolation and stop abuse and neglect before they start, so that we can better live up to our national promise of justice for all.

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