

## Key Framing Guides

# Storytelling Strategies

## Storytelling for Strategic Framers

The American public is generally unaware of elder abuse as a social problem. As a result, advocates need communications strategies that can both raise public consciousness and prime people to understand what solutions can best address and prevent elder abuse.

Storytelling is a powerful way to engage people in thinking about a problem and its solutions because, as psychology tells us, we humans are hardwired for narrative. The right story can move the public and policymakers to think systemically and can catalyze community change. Choosing which story is the right one, however, takes some framing know-how.

This section of the toolkit will show you how to tell stories in a way that has been empirically proven to help the public understand elder abuse as a preventable public health issue and to awaken the citizen—the public problem-solver—who resides within every American.

The first key to effective storytelling for social change is to know the difference between what political scientist Shanto Iyengar calls “episodic” and “thematic” stories.

Episodic stories are narratives about specific individuals in particular places facing discrete or “one-off” events or experiences—for example, an emotional story about an older woman whose family circumstances and limited financial means leave her vulnerable to a neighbor’s fraudulent scheming. Such a story situates elder abuse as a private problem that can only be addressed by educating older people about how to protect themselves and by punishing people who commit elder abuse.

One reason these episodic stories backfire for advocates is that casting older people as victims reinforces the dominant perception that older people are vulnerable and helpless. While this perception may generate concern about elder abuse in the short term, it simultaneously fuels people’s fatalistic belief that abuse and neglect are inevitable, overwhelming problems that are simply too big to fix on a broad scale.

Thematic stories, in contrast, are narratives that “widen the lens” through which people view a social problem. Thematic stories highlight the broad social contexts and structural realities that surround and shape people’s lived experiences, choices, and behaviors. By making visible the systems and structures that influence people’s outcomes, thematic storytelling enables the public to think more expansively about the causes of and solutions to complex social problems. Such stories invite “big

picture” thinking and boost people’s optimism about our ability to solve difficult social problems.

[Watch this video](#) to learn a bit more about the difference between episodic and thematic storytelling (password: fw).

## The Communications Challenge

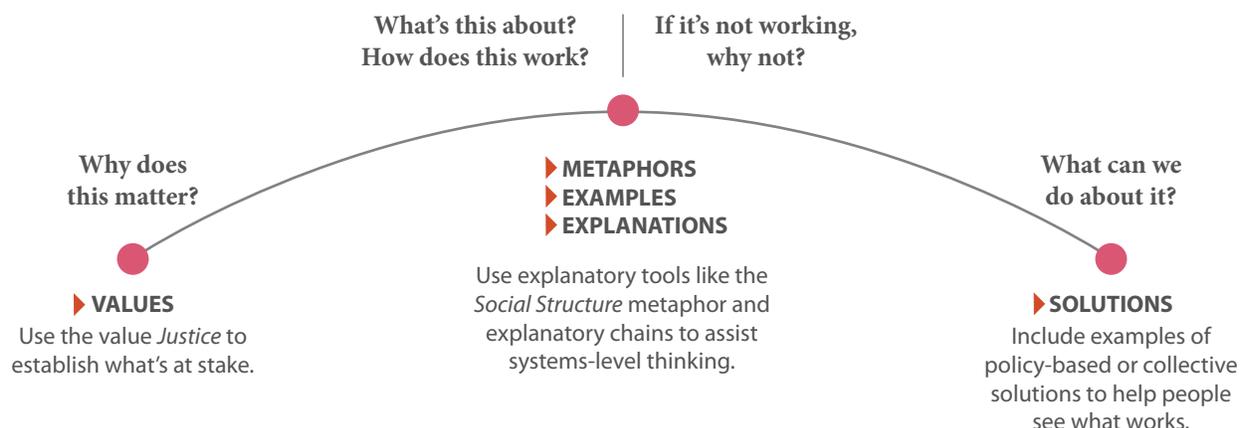
The public’s dominant model of elder abuse is reinforced by the episodic stories that typically get told about the issue—stories that take a highly personal, individualized view, focusing almost exclusively on the character or personality traits of the people directly involved in the situation, or the relationship between the two people. While these stories may be highly compelling, telling them through this tightly focused lens leaves a lot of important aspects out of the picture: the factors and conditions responsible for the problem; the opportunities for public engagement; the impact on the larger society; and the need to change systems, laws, policies, and programs so that they promote better outcomes.

Thus, a major challenge for communicators is to broaden people’s view of elder abuse beyond the “perpetrator–victim” relationship to help people see the societal contexts within which abuse can happen.

## The Framing “Fix”

Three framing tools emerged from FrameWorks’ qualitative and quantitative experiments that showed a robust ability to help members of the public to think more expansively about the problem and—crucially—its solutions. These are the value **Social Justice**, the explanatory metaphor **Social Structure**, and explanatory chains—logic sequences that explicitly connect the underlying causes of social problems to their public consequences.

FrameWorks’ experimental results clearly demonstrated that, while each of these framing strategies works well independently to boost people’s knowledge about and support for preventing elder abuse, they were most effective when integrated together into a complete narrative.



Here’s an example of a narrative that incorporates all three of these frame elements along with an individual story. Notice here how the details of Maria’s individual story are embedded in a “big picture” or thematic narrative to contextualize her story and boost readers’ understanding of the prevalence and scope of elder abuse.

In our country, we believe in justice for all. Yet we fail to live up to this promise, especially for older people. We can, however, work together to build a just society. But we should approach it as we might plan to construct a building.

The first step is to put in place load-bearing beams to support a building’s structure and safeguard its inhabitants. Similarly, to create a just society, we need beams like services and programs that integrate older people into our communities. If these beams are in place and continually maintained, older people will have more opportunities to stay connected. But if we don’t have these kinds of beams, or if they are weak, older people will likely experience social isolation, which increases the likelihood of abuse and neglect.

Maria, 77, reminds us why we need strong support beams for older people. Maria has lived alone in her apartment ever since her husband died three years ago. Her local community center closed last year, so she rarely has opportunities to interact with other people. Sometimes, she goes days on end without speaking to anyone. Her son, who lives an hour away, used to stop by twice a week to help with household chores and bring groceries. As his work responsibilities have increased, however, he has not been

Values establish why an issue matters and prime people to engage more deeply with the issue. So, to get the most bang for your framing buck, try using the value **Justice** at the beginning of a message.

**Tip:** How many ways can you say “justice”? Jumpstart your creative application of the framing strategies by brainstorming synonyms and turns of phrase that evoke the **Justice** concept.

Repetition is a framer’s friend—don’t be shy about weaving **Justice** into your message multiple times. The more often people hear it, the “stickier” it will be, and—voilà—the greater your message’s effectiveness.

Metaphors work best when they have room to breathe. Whenever possible, build out the metaphor concept with a variety of cues that can act as support beams for the main analogy (see what we did there?).

Remember that stories about individuals are more effective when they’re wrapped in thematic frames, as Maria’s story is here—explanations of social contexts (e.g., incidence of isolation among older people), structural conditions (e.g., lack of support for caregivers), or larger societal trends (e.g., funding cuts). When reviewing a story about people, ask yourself whether it includes enough information for your audience to identify those big-picture factors. If not, you probably have some reframing to do.

able to visit regularly. On the rare occasions when he does visit, he is overwhelmed by his responsibility as his mother's sole social support, and he becomes frustrated with her. Maria lacks regular and positive social interactions with a variety of people; as a result, her living conditions and health have deteriorated, and she is becoming malnourished. She is not alone. Millions of older people in our country are socially isolated and at greater risk of neglect and abuse.

The good news is we can better support people like Maria and reduce stress on family caregivers. Senior centers, community institutions, and friendly visitor programs, for example, connect older people with others and help them participate in community life. If we build a stronger social structure around older people, we can reduce social isolation and overcome elder abuse and neglect. We can create a more just society for Maria and for all older people across our country. We can live up to our national promise of justice for all.

To build a strong explanatory chain, try imagining each of your sentences as a domino connected closely enough to those immediately before and after it to keep the path of logic moving from initial cause to final (public) effect. Aim for step-by-step explanation whenever you can. Leave nothing to chance.

In empirical testing, this complete narrative structure was shown to increase the public's sense of efficacy—its belief that something can be done to address elder abuse—by almost 7 points!

## Now You Try!

Here's an example taken from a [documentary film](#) featuring a series of stories of abuse. Watch the following excerpt and look for opportunities to use the recommended frame elements—**Justice**, **Social Structure**, and explanatory chains—to widen the lens on this individual story. After watching the clip, take a moment to answer these two questions:

1. How does this story widen the lens by bringing systems and structures into view?
2. How else could this story be framed to reinforce and build understanding about why this matters, what's at stake, how it works, and what can be done?

You may have noticed that [the video](#) takes some steps to widen the lens on Norman's story. For instance:

- It is set in a social services agency, which expands the context, making the story about more than *just* people directly involved.
- It includes his caseworker, pointing to some of the systems that are in place to address elder abuse.

Did you also notice other opportunities to build more evidence-based framing into the story?

For example:

- How different this message would be if it were framed with a broad statement about why elder abuse matters to our society.
- How using the **Social Supports** metaphor could help to explain to the public how better policies and programs could prevent experiences like Norman's from occurring in the first place.
- How an explanatory chain could illustrate for viewers the ways in which social isolation can enable abuse .
- How including structural solutions could leave viewers with a better understanding of what our society needs to do to prevent elder abuse.

## Planning for More Effective Storytelling: A Resource Guide for Advocates

The strategies below can make your evidence-based storytelling easier and more efficient. Think of them as your framing support system: three simple tips that can be applied to many kinds of advocacy communications about elder abuse. Importantly, these strategies are low- or no-cost. All they require is some thoughtful planning and a small investment of time.

### 1 Build a Thematic Story Bank

Be intentional about collecting stories that demonstrate how community action and systemic and structural change are critical to preventing elder abuse. While story banks are nothing new, strategic framers know that the *kind* of stories advocates tell are just as important as how many they tell and how often—look for narratives that can foster people’s thinking about broad-scale and longer term change. And by keeping a file of thematic or “wide-angle lens” stories on hand, you will be ready to frame effectively even when facing a reporter’s deadline.

Thematic stories:

- Focus on group efforts, not individual heroes or villains.
- Show trends or patterns that shape conditions for a community or group of people.
- Reveal the structural causes or social determinants of a problem.
- Demonstrate solutions that can be replicated or scaled up.

There are lots of thematic stories. Here are a few examples:

- An initiative that engages middle- and high-school children with older adults in their communities.
- A neighborhood walking group that did more than exercise their bodies together—they exercised their collective power to “make over” their local park, expanding safe access to outdoor fitness and recreation for themselves and their communities.
- A community center that partnered with local officials to establish and raise awareness of a hotline to report instances of elder abuse and neglect.
- Government or nonprofit initiatives or programs designed to get older Americans involved in volunteering and mentoring.

- Advocates forming a coalition to build local and state support for laws designed to fund better training and oversight of, and support for, caregivers and facilities in the field of aging services.

Each of these stories showcases groups working together to build supports that promote better interactions between older Americans and their communities. Having good examples of thematic stories on hand lets you make the most of opportunities to bring public attention to elder abuse issues.

## 2 Create Your Own Images

Choose images in your messages carefully to ensure that they complement, rather than detract from, your thematic storytelling.

A deficit of framing-friendly images exists—for example, images of older people interacting in groups in diverse settings, older people engaged in collaborative or leadership roles, or older people in non-family groups of people of all ages. Work to change that. Make a dedicated effort to create images and photographs that can be made available to partners and the media. These photographs should reinforce thematic framing strategies by expanding the ways that older adults’ diverse contexts, experiences, and relationships are represented.

## 3 Share the Tools

Many hands make light work. When a variety of different voices from different parts of the advocacy community use a shared strategy to communicate about an issue, the impact of the message grows. To increase your communications’ effectiveness, encourage your partners to adopt a shared reframing strategy. For example:

- Create and share a PowerPoint template that helps advocates organize information about their work in ways that help audiences to see structural causes and solutions to elder abuse and related issues.
- Use social media to find partners who are already communicating in these ways and share their messages. Ask them to share yours.
- With your partners, adopt a shared slogan that employs the **Justice** value or **Social Structure** metaphor to rally around elder abuse prevention.

And whatever you do, remember to FRAME ON!