

# Telling better stories to advance health justice

Pop culture stories and narratives influence how we understand health. They shape our thinking about what it means to be healthy, what we can do to improve our own health and the health of others, and who bears responsibility for that work. This is why storytelling is a vital tool for health justice advocates.

We often hear the words *story* and *narrative* used interchangeably. In everyday conversation, they work as synonyms. When engaging in narrative change work, however, the distinction between *story* and *narrative* matters.

- A story is an action-driven tale about particular people in particular places acting in particular ways that lead to particular changes over time.
- Narratives, in contrast, are patterns in story features (like character, setting, and plot) that appear again and again across stories. Narratives show *types* of people in *types* of places taking *types* of action that lead to *types* of changes over time.

Narrative patterns shape how the features of story are organized, and the meanings that audiences take from them. Stories bring these narrative patterns to life.

Recognizing narrative patterns is one key to changing them. Another key is learning to use the features of story. Turning these keys can unlock new ways for people to see an issue.

## The “Health Bootstraps” Narrative and the Stories It Fuels

The “health bootstraps” narrative helps us understand the connection between narrative and story. This narrative depicts an individual who overcomes a health challenge through determination and self-discipline. Countless stories spring from and feed into this narrative structure.

One example is the long-running reality competition show *The Biggest Loser*. Throughout the episodes, contestants face challenges, resist temptations, and endure weigh-ins. While the cast and their unique stories change each season, the narrative framework remains consistent.

The show champions health individualism: the belief that any overweight “loser” can become a slim “winner” through hard work. It presents health as a personal triumph and treats bodies as evidence of individual merit or failure. Ultimately, *The Biggest Loser* conveys the message that better health comes from better personal choices.

Society’s role is left off-screen. Little is said about the billions of dollars that food companies spend to keep high-calorie, highly-processed foods cheap and visible. The role of social norms around body types, diet culture, or weight shaming rarely come up. By playing down societal factors, the show also obscures the idea that collective action – not just individual action – could make a difference.

*The Biggest Loser* is a prime example of a story that embodies the “health bootstraps” narrative. But it is far from the only example, because a narrative is an overarching pattern.

We can find tellings of the “health bootstraps” narrative across different media: News stories about “tiny fighters” in the NICU. Influencers touting lifestyle changes they credit with reversing chronic illness. Memoirs featuring “rock bottom to redemption” arcs.

These narratives consistently repeat the core idea that health comes from personal choices. They do this through similar character types, settings, points of view, and plots. There’s always a protagonist who “fights” for good health. Plots seldom address broader social factors affecting health, such as quality health care or exposure to discrimination. Instead, they focus on actions that demonstrate grit and good decisions.

## Counter Dominant Narratives By Activating Four Story Features

By using the features of story strategically, we can carve new grooves in public discourse.

### **Story Feature: Setting**



Setting helps people hold many details in mind by situating a story in a time, place, and set of conditions. Health justice advocates can use setting to show the context and constraints that shape people's health journeys. Setting can also help people recognize and relate to abstract structures. Consider, for example, showing images of a food desert. It's qualitatively different than offering a definition or statistics.

### **Story Feature: Characters**



Characters – whether people or organizations – turn abstract traits into relatable, memorable personas. Health justice advocates benefit from telling stories that involve a cast of characters with complementary skills. “Ensemble casts” show that social change comes through collective, coordinated efforts. This counterbalances dominant narratives that focus on the extraordinary actions of a heroic individual.

### **Story Feature: Plot**



Plot weaves events into a cause-and-effect sequence, showing how action leads to change. Health justice advocates can craft plots that show that collective action is real and effective. This moves away from willpower as the driving force in a story. Instead, audiences see how remarkable change actually happens at scale: through policy change, institutional shifts, and systems-level transformation.

### **Story Feature: Point of View**



Point of view is the vantage point through which a story is seen and understood. It shapes what details come to light and how people interpret them. In narrative change, point of view means the perspective of a social group. Health justice advocates can use point of view to spotlight the experiences of those facing injustice. From this angle, structural barriers become clear, and it's harder to ignore our shared humanity. This can help widen how the public views health.

## **The Possibility in Patterns: We Can Recognize, Reframe, and Repeat**

Repeated narratives wear grooves in public thinking. The “health bootstraps” narrative wears grooves that lead people to think of health as something individuals earn through effort. We collectively move away from thinking of health as a common good created through collective infrastructure.

To build support for health justice, we need new narratives that carve out new grooves in public thinking. That means we need to consider both overarching patterns and specific stories.

Change can start from either side. Sometimes, grassroots stories emerge first. People share real experiences, and over time a new narrative pattern gradually forms. Other times, strategists create a counter-narrative pattern and then engage storytellers to share it. Either way, a counter-narrative can be intentionally strengthened. As more stories express this counter-narrative, it begins to influence public discourse.

Narratives thrive on repetition. Counter-narratives gain momentum when shared by many voices over time. Social media can supercharge this dynamic, smoothing the path for narratives to spread organically. When people share stories and counter-narratives within their communities, they become active participants in shaping and spreading them.

Dominant, entrenched narratives always have a head start. But they also offer countless chances for change. Because narratives are made up of many stories, that means we have many opportunities to shift them, even slightly. The features of story provide tools to gradually reshape even the most established narratives, piece by piece, telling by telling.