Key Framing Guides

Annotated FAQs

Staying on Frame in Real Time

Knowing what dominant cultural models shape the public's understanding of an issue can help communicators predict how people will respond to the cues in a particular message.

And if you can predict, you can prepare.

Strategic framers prepare by anticipating the questions that are likely to arise from people's dominant patterns of thinking on the issue. They consider what "traps" might exist in a possible response and then choose cues with the potential to build a more productive way of thinking about the issue.

The sample question-and-answer sequences here show this tactical thought process in action. The examples come from the kinds of questions commonly raised about elder abuse by members of the public, potential funders, and policy makers. The reframed responses are not offered as "correct answers" to questions you might be asked, but rather as illustrations of how to apply FrameWorks' evidence-based recommendations to talk more effectively about elder abuse and related issues.

While communicators are welcome to use the recommended responses, we encourage you to use the analysis of "false start" and "reframed" answers to build your own capacity to apply these principles deftly throughout your communications practice.

Q: What exactly is elder abuse?

THE FALSE-START ANSWER

Elder abuse refers to intentional or neglectful acts by a caregiver or "trusted" individual that harm or can cause harm to a vulnerable older person.

Abuse can take various forms and may involve physical, emotional, or sexual harm, as well as financial exploitation and intentional or unintentional neglect. Oftentimes, victims know their abusers and depend on those who hurt them for food, shelter, personal care, or companionship.

Abusers include both men and women alike, and it is not uncommon for adult children and spouses to play the role of abuser.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

In a society that values the just treatment of all people, elder abuse has implications for all of us, and so it's important to find the right solutions to it.

Elder abuse is the mistreatment or harming of an older person. It can include physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, along with neglect and financial exploitation.

Many social factors—for example, a lack of support services and community resources—can make conditions ripe for elder abuse. Ageism (biases against or stereotypes about older people that keep them from being fully a part of their community) also play a role in enabling elder abuse. By changing these contributing factors, we can prevent elder abuse and make sure all of us have the opportunity to thrive as we age.

THE FALSE-START ANSWER ANALYSIS

- By not opening with a tested value, this reply misses an opportunity to engage listeners by reminding them why the issue matters.

- Since this reply does not propose any solutions, non-experts are left to conclude that elder abuse is just a sad fact of life for some less fortunate people.

- The attribution of responsibility here falls solely to individual actors, limiting the public's ability to see the broader structural and cultural factors (e.g., ageism) that contribute to elder abuse.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- This reframed reply appeals to the tested value ***Justice*** to establish elder abuse as a public, not a personal, problem.

- Since the public is deeply fatalistic about our ability to solve big social problems, it's important to foster people's optimism that feasible solutions exist.

- By emphasizing the structural factors that create the conditions for elder abuse, this response opens the door to a more expansive consideration of the problem and its solutions.

> **Q:** There will always be people who seek to take advantage of the weak and vulnerable. Can we really hope to prevent elder abuse?

THE FALSE-START ANSWER

The notion that evil prevails when good people do nothing is easily applied to the topic of elder abuse. However, if we pay attention, ask questions, and speak up when something seems off, we can do our part to prevent elder abuse.

Health professionals can be better trained to recognize the signs of abuse and neglect, the public can further educate itself on the available resources, and seniors can learn how to protect themselves from becoming victims. With collective vigilance, care, and cooperation, we can stop elder abuse.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

We can lessen the risk of elder abuse by putting supports and foundations in place that make abuse difficult.

If we think of society as a building that supports our wellbeing, then it makes sense to design the sturdiest building we can—one with the beams and load-bearing walls necessary to keep everyone safe and healthy as we age.

For example, constructing community supports and human services for family caregivers and older adults can alleviate risk factors tied to elder abuse. Increased funding can support efforts to train service providers in working with older adults. Identifying ways to empower older adults will reduce the harmful effects of ageism. And leveraging expert knowledge can provide the tools needed to identify, address, and ultimately prevent abuse.

THE FALSE-START ANSWER ANALYSIS

- This reply primarily focuses on individual-level solutions, ignoring the influence of the structural and cultural factors that create contexts that are conducive to elder abuse.

- Word choices like "evil" are likely to reinforce the public's perception that elder abuse is primarily the result of bad people taking advantage of powerless victims. Advocates should aim to "widen the lens" to help people see how social contexts foster abuse.

- A greater acknowledgement that older people are not inherently vulnerable and powerless to protect themselves is missing.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

- Instead of rebutting the assumption that abuse is primarily the result of bad people's actions—which can backfire by strengthening that assumption through repetition—this reframed reply reorients the conversation toward collective problem-solving.

- Applying the **Social Structure** metaphor makes systemic solutions, including preventive measures, "easier to think" for non-experts.

- Including an example of the role that older adults may play in combating elder abuse redirects thinking away from paternalistic assumptions that older people are helpless to protect themselves.

- This reply emphasizes that understanding and action must go beyond the individual level by focusing on social and structural solutions.

Q: How often does elder abuse really happen? Is it really that big an issue?

THE FALSE-START ANSWER

Eleven percent of older adults over the age of 60 experience elder abuse each year. Despite this high occurrence, abuse is largely underreported. Estimates suggest that for every one case that is reported, five go unreported. There are various reasons for this—victims are scared or embarrassed, they don't want to get their perpetrators (who are often family members) in trouble, or they are afraid of losing their independence.

The costs of elder abuse are high and far-reaching. Victims often experience consequences in the form of losing their independence, their homes and life savings, and their dignity. The mortality rate for those experiencing elder abuse also rises drastically, to as high as 300 percent.

THE REFRAMED ANSWER

Elder abuse affects communities on many levels, from public health to civic participation to economic resources. For our communities to thrive, we need everyone in them to thrive, too.

Contrary to popular belief, elder abuse is widespread, and people often experience more than one type of abuse. Though as many as 1 in 10 older adults are abused each year, a majority of cases go unreported for many reasons, including a lack of social supports necessary to make reporting easier for those who experience abuse.

The costs of elder abuse are high for the affected individuals and society alike. Older people's losses can be tangible (their homes and life savings) and intangible (their dignity, independence, and possibly their lives). For society, elder abuse is both a social and economic issue: it creates health care and legal costs, which are often shouldered by public programs like Medicare and Medicaid, and reduces older people's participation in the life of the community. It's in everyone's interest to prevent elder abuse.

THE FALSE-START ANSWER ANALYSIS

• The data overload in this reply may seem persuasive to an expert, but the general public lacks the knowledge to make these numbers meaningful. Without careful framing, data can overwhelm non-experts or leave them to create their own interpretation of the information.

• Not acknowledging the impacts that elder abuse has on society keeps the focus squarely on the individual level, which makes it difficult to engage people in a discussion of systemic solutions.

• FrameWorks research shows that the term "seniors" is more likely to activate people's implicit bias than the terms "older people" or "older adults."

THE REFRAMED ANSWER ANALYSIS

• This reframed reply begins by priming people to think of the collective nature of the problem—this strategy answers the question without honoring the assumption that elder abuse is "not a big issue."

• One data point here is enough to support the claim that elder abuse is widespread.

• The repetition of the importance of solutions (in the first paragraph and final sentence) wards off the public's tendency to be fatalistic about solving social problems.