



Framing with Visuals

Photos, graphics, and videos are important framing opportunities. Use this resource as a guide to sparking more productive understandings of mental health with these media.

Frame with Visuals: A Guide to the Strategic Use of Photos, Graphics, and Video

Framing multigenerational approaches to improving mental health outcomes is not only about language; it's also about visuals. Today's communications landscape offers many opportunities to frame multigenerational approaches to mental health with visuals—in websites, fact sheets, reports, social media and blog posts, presentation slides, and more. Images in these types of collateral trigger attitudes and beliefs about adult and child mental health in the same way that words can. They can build new ways of understanding—or undermine carefully constructed verbal frames. Be sure to integrate images into your overall framing strategy and be systematic and thoughtful about using them in your communications collateral. And make sure the images you use don't fuel misconceptions, such as the belief that people achieve mental health through willpower.

Widen the Lens

Close-up shots of individuals limit public thinking about the nature of child and adult mental health and of solutions to it. Portraits of individuals emphasize the personal aspects of mental health, conceal the environmental and systems-level factors that influence it, and shut down consideration of context and solutions. In short, the narrower the frame, the smaller the opportunity to explain the role systems play in mental health.

Consider this image:



It shows a child in despair. It may cause people to feel compassion for the boy or perhaps disdain for him or his parents. But it won't help them think about the societal causes of mental health disorders or how to implement the policies and programs that promote good mental health. This image won't help people understand the need to strengthen our health care system so that all children have access to treatment and services or see the value of policies we can take as a society to prevent mental illness and promote healthy development.

An alternate image might show a child interacting with an adult. This type of visual cue reinforces the importance of early attachment and relationships as a support for child mental health. Images that depict children in contexts that support mental health [babies sleeping safely in a daycare setting, young children playing on a playground, kids learning from a teacher in a school classroom) use a wide-angle lens to show mental health supports. Also, consider alternative subjects like primary care providers, nurses, community members, educators, and others who work in prevention, early intervention, and remediation. Showcasing these people reinforces the message that supporting mental health is a community-wide activity.

Choose Natural, Dynamic Images

Choose images that show activity, such as photos of children and caregivers who are interacting with each other. These will help counteract unproductive beliefs about early childhood development, such as the belief that child development is a passive process that happens naturally, without adult intervention, or that children simply don't have mental health. This image, from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), shows an adult observing a child at play. This kind of portrayal helps people understand that developmental milestones are concrete, observable, and important. And, because supportive relationships between children and caregivers is essential to promoting a more complete understanding of development, these kinds of images help frame multigenerational approaches to building wellbeing.



Also, when taking photos and videos of programs, activities, or events, don't tell participants stop what they're doing and face the camera. If they do so out of habit, encourage them to go back to what they were doing and pretend the camera isn't there. And, when possible, avoid stock photos. They appear staged, posed, and unreal, which works against an important communications goal: inviting the public to view mental health as something that matters to all of us. Natural and candid images are better able to draw your viewers in. They frame mental health as a "real" issue that affects everyday people, which,

in turn, helps people understand that mental health affects not only individuals but everyone in society. This helps build an understanding of what mental health is, how to support it, and why doing so benefits everyone in our communities, not just certain groups.

Put Adult and Child Mental Health in Context

The public recognizes that social and environmental factors influence mental health outcomes, but they don't understand how environments affect brain chemistry or how they influence the outcomes of children, families, and communities. Unfortunately, few images depict a larger social context. Note how this image, also from the CDC, crops out the environment. Doing so inhibits thinking about the societal causes of mental health disorders and solutions to them.



If faced with a choice between showing decontextualized people, or people interacting with each other and in their communities, choose the latter! These images show how environments and experiences influence mental health. They build understanding of the problem and of solutions, such as efforts to improve caregiver's mental health, which can improve parenting and promote healthy development and better mental health outcomes.

Involve Your Team

And last but not least: Take as much care with your visuals as you do with your words to ensure they support your story. Find time to locate and create the images that build understanding of the collective importance of mental health. And, when possible, invite photographers, videographers, graphic artists, and web designers into the message development process so they understand the strategic framing strategy.

Framing with Visuals Checklist:

When framing multigenerational approaches to mental health with visuals, ask yourself:

1. Do the visuals make the same points as the text? (i.e., do they reinforce the idea of a multigenerational approach to mental health?)
2. Do the images break or reinforce common misconceptions about mental health? For example, are there any visual cues that might conflate mental health with mental illness?

3. Do the sequence and placement of photos demonstrate cause and effect, and trends instead of isolated events?
4. Do visuals suggest the public nature of the problem, including the fact that we all benefit from improved mental health outcomes?
5. Do your visuals get to the point and do they show solutions? What is the viewer being asked to do (to think, to support, etc.)?

For more on framing with visuals, take *Wide Angle Lens*, a free online course. This self-paced, interactive course is designed to help social change communicators tell stories that build a better understanding of the causes of social problems and their solutions. It is available at www.frameworksacademy.org.