

Communicating about Physical Activity: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations

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Introduction

It is easy for messages to get lost in translation when talking about physical activity. There are several barriers to being heard and understood, and a few opportunities to seize.

When people think about physical activity, they almost exclusively think of exercise and strenuous workouts that happen in fitness spaces, at dedicated times of the day. They think that individuals are almost solely responsible for deciding whether or not to engage in physical activity. At the same time, people already know that physical activity is good for the body and the mind, and they recognize that interpersonal connections can help people be physically active.

We offer strategies to help navigate these ways of thinking, providing preliminary recommendations about how to address these challenges and take advantage of opportunities.

For each challenge and each opportunity posed by the existing ways the public thinks about physical activity, we offer strategies to help navigate these ways of thinking, providing preliminary recommendations about how to address these challenges and take advantage of opportunities. Because FrameWorks' research aims to create culture change broadly, this strategic brief identifies those ideas or beliefs about physical activity that are shared across different groups in society and represent the most relevant challenges and opportunities for the field's future communications.

This strategic brief is grounded in research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute, in collaboration with Michelle Segar, PhD, Director

of the University of Michigan's Sports, Health, and Activity Research and Policy Center, with funding from the National Physical Activity Plan Alliance (NPAP Alliance) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), to examine field and public thinking about physical activity.¹ This research is a part of a larger project to develop a comprehensive core story of physical activity to effectively communicate about the issue.

What Are We Trying to Communicate?

To develop an effective strategy for communicating about physical activity, it's necessary to identify a set of key ideas to get across. To do this, FrameWorks researchers conducted interviews and a feedback session with experts in the field and reviewed relevant literature. Below, we summarize the key ideas that emerged from this process, which represent the core points that the field wants to be able to communicate and the solutions for which experts want to build support through communications.

What is physical activity?

- Physical activity encompasses all the ways in which people move their bodies and expend energy.
- Physical activity can vary in type, intensity, and duration, with different implications for health and fitness.
- Active living is a way of life that integrates physical activity into daily routines.

What factors influence physical activity?

- People's attitudes about and experiences with physical activity are strong predictors of their willingness to be physically active.
- People's motivations for being physically active are not limited to health and fitness goals but include wanting to socialize, save money, and have fun.
- Strong social support networks can help a person initiate and sustain a more physically active lifestyle.

- Time is an important factor that shapes individuals' willingness and ability to engage in physical activity.
- Workplace demands and resources can serve as barriers or facilitators of physical activity among the public.
- Features of the built environment affect participation in physical activity. For example, if a city has fewer sidewalks, people are less likely to walk.
- The natural environment can promote or inhibit participation in physical activity because it creates favorable or unfavorable conditions to be active.
- Living in a low-income or underserved community can make it more difficult to engage in regular physical activity because of lack of appropriate infrastructure, safety, or networks of support.

What are the effects of physical activity?

- People's health, happiness, and overall wellbeing can be improved by physical activity. Being active can increase muscular fitness and reduce the risk for health issues like cancer and heart disease. Physical activity can reduce the risk of dementia and improve cognition function over the lifespan.
- Children and adolescents especially benefit from physical activity as it supports positive brain development and helps promote healthy lifestyle patterns.
- Physical activity creates social connections and a strong sense of community by generating greater opportunities for social interaction and community cohesion.
- Physical activity has important social, economic, and public health implications. By reducing risk for chronic disease in the population, it can decrease sick days, improve productivity, and reduce health care and economic costs for the country.

What can be done to promote physical activity?

- Increase the amount and quality of physical activity in schools by improving physical education lessons, providing daily recess, and incorporating movement into classroom lessons.
- Make changes to the built environment so that it is easier for people to be active outdoors.
- Establish cross-sector partnerships to promote physical activity.

- Act at the local level to engage city and community leaders in identifying priorities and solutions that meet the needs of local residents and communities (e.g., walking groups, activity programs for seniors, and free dance classes).
- Support and expand ongoing communication efforts to strengthen public consensus around the importance of physical activity.

Challenges and Opportunities

To understand the dominant patterns of thinking among the public about physical activity, FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 two-hour-long, one-on-one interviews with a diverse group of participants. These interviews were analyzed to identify deep, implicit ways of thinking that members of the public use to reason and talk about physical activity. This research sheds light on current thinking about physical activity among the public.²

Based on this research, we identify both challenges and opportunities that communicators face in getting across the key ideas outlined above. We offer provisional recommendations about how to respond to challenges and leverage opportunities, with a couple of important caveats: Further research is needed to identify specific framing strategies that work, and these general recommendations will need to be adapted to specific audiences and contexts.

Challenges

Challenge #1: The public has a narrow understanding of physical activity as vigorous exercise.³

When people think about physical activity, what comes to mind is different forms of exercise, from team sports to running and biking to brisk walking and group fitness classes. People associate physical activity strictly with exercise or workouts that elevate one's heart rate, build muscle, and produce sweat. Other types of activity that aren't "cardio workouts" (e.g., walking, gardening, or household chores) are either missing entirely from people's thinking or quickly fade when they do come to mind.

Because people equate physical activity with exercise, they assume it happens at discrete points in the day—scheduled times when people have decided to exercise. Physical activity that happens over the course of the day, as we go about other tasks, is largely off the radar for the public.

This is a foundational challenge, which many of the challenges and opportunities described below stem directly from. Addressing it effectively is key to building understanding of and support for measures to promote physical activity in the US.

Communicating about physical activity: why terminology matters.

Currently, the public has a limited and inaccurate understanding of the term “active living.” The public mainly understand “active living” to refer to older adults and retirement communities (most likely because they associate the term with more commonly known phrases like “active seniors” or “assisted living”). When using the term “active living” the field should provide a definition and examples, to be sure that the public fully understand its meaning.

How this pattern of thinking makes it harder to get key points across

This narrow view of physical activity makes it harder for people to think broadly about less strenuous types of physical activity that can also support health, wellbeing, and social connections. This way of thinking also leads people to draw a clear line between physical activity and daily routines and activities, which makes it difficult for them to imagine ways of weaving physical activity into everyday life more seamlessly.

How to address this challenge

Be explicit that physical activity includes different types of activities at varying levels of intensity, not just cardio workouts, and that it can be a part of people’s daily routines.

Give examples of daily activities like gardening or taking one’s children to the park as forms of physical activity.

Communicating during the COVID-19 pandemic: why the examples we use matter.

At a time when people are likely to be sheltering in place or spending more time at home, be sure to include examples of everyday *indoor* activities that can support people’s health and wellbeing, happiness, and social connections (e.g., playing hide-and-seek with children, doing work around the house, setting up standing desks at home). Also include examples of everyday activities that can still safely happen outdoors (e.g., work in the yard or garden, walk within the neighborhood with appropriate social distancing).

Challenge #2: Members of the public tend to assume that a person's willpower and inner drive shapes whether they are physically active or not.

The public thinks that individuals are almost solely responsible for their levels of physical activity. People assume that behaviors are dependent upon the choices that individuals make for themselves, and that those choices are fundamentally shaped by internal factors like inner drive and willpower. In other words, the public reasons that when people are physically active, it is because they were strong enough to make a conscious decision to do so.

As a result, people's go-to solution to increase levels of physical activity in the US is to increase people's innate motivation and drive with incentives, for instance providing financial benefits for individuals who work out regularly.

How this pattern of thinking makes it harder to get key points across

This pattern of thinking makes it harder for the public to see how people's environment and factors beyond individuals' control (e.g., community safety) can either support or get in the way of physical activity for people. Instead, they are likely to hold individuals responsible for the choices they make for themselves, and to blame them for lacking the will to be physically active.

When the public think individualistically, they are also unlikely to see the need for—and to support—solutions aimed at addressing the environmental and structural problems that currently limit people's opportunities to be physically active. As a result, people can easily become fatalistic about the possibility of improving rates of physical activity. If certain individuals don't have the will to make⁴ the right choices, the thinking goes, then nothing can be done to address this issue.

How to address this challenge

Lead with structural factors (e.g., safe parks and access to transportation), to encourage people to focus on how environments can promote or inhibit physical activity.

Avoid leading with a discussion of individual responsibility. When we start by meeting people where they are at, we reinforce their default beliefs—in this case, that individuals are solely responsible for their level of physical activity. This, in turn, makes it even harder for the public to see and focus on the role of structural obstacles and the solutions needed to address them.

Explain how systemic factors shape opportunities for physical activity, don't just assert that they do. This will help counterbalance people's tendency to focus on individuals only.

Use terms like "options" and "opportunities," instead of "choices" and "lifestyle." They are less likely to cue thinking about individual responsibility in the public's minds.

Challenge #3: Members of the public tend to adopt a “no pain, no gain” perspective on physical activity (i.e., exercise).

The public views the desirable results exercise can provide (e.g., get fit, burn calories, or have a “perfect body”) as a reward for the pain and discomfort one necessarily feels *while* exercising. People assume that engaging in physical activity (i.e., exercise) is bound to generate discomfort and pain, but that it is something everyone must go through *in the moment* to reap benefits *later*.

When adopting this “no pain, no gain” approach, people also assume that engaging in physical activity is particularly challenging for people who have been inactive for some time. They reason that the pain and discomfort inherent to exercise is something that takes getting used to, and that the longer people have been inactive, the more difficult it is going to be for them to do so.

How this pattern of thinking makes it harder to get key points across

When people focus on discomfort and pain as the barrier to physical activity, this pulls their focus off environmental factors (e.g., access to parks, urban planning, community safety). Instead, people assume that physical activity is just naturally hard to do and that some individuals might just naturally be more reluctant to experience that pain and discomfort.

When thinking in this way, people are also likely to be skeptical of systemic solutions like promoting active transportation and improving public safety, or deem them irrelevant to the issue. Instead, they will gravitate towards solutions that target individuals specifically, like raising awareness of what people stand to “gain” from the “pain” of physical activity.

How to address this challenge

Avoid leading with a discussion of the difficulties of exercising and working out. This is likely to reinforce the assumption that the main barriers to physical activity can be overcome by willpower and drive.

Emphasize that physical activity can be pleasant and joyful and give examples of what that might look like. This will help to disrupt people’s association between physical activity and pain and shift their focus away from the role of individual willpower.

Challenge #4: The public thinks that physical activity mostly happens in dedicated workout spaces.

The public has some understanding that environments matter and that people need spaces to be physically active. But because of their focus on exercise and workouts, this understanding is currently limited to gyms, fitness facilities, and some outdoor spaces like hiking trails, for instance.

How this pattern of thinking makes it harder to get key points across

This limited understanding makes it hard for people to see that physical activity can take place in spaces other than fitness spaces, like someone's workplace, or a farmer's market.

The public's limited view of environments also makes it hard for people to see the value of policies aimed at changing community infrastructure or people's work environments.

How to address this challenge

Strike a balance between mentions of fitness spaces and other types of spaces in which physical activity can occur.

Give examples of the types of activities that can happen in non-fitness spaces, like playing in safe playgrounds, cycling on bike paths, "walk and talk" meetings at work, or participating in line dancing at a farmer's market.

Communicating during the COVID-19 pandemic: why the examples we use matter.

At a time when people are spending time at home and there is less distinction between at-work and at-home time, be sure to include examples of how people can be active throughout the day and in different places throughout their home (e.g., yoga in their living rooms, walking during a work call, sitting on a ball chair, stretching before bed).

Challenge #5: The public does not fully understand how people’s socioeconomic status can limit their opportunities to be physically active.

When it comes to the role of socioeconomic status in physical activity, members of the public mainly focus on what money can buy. They recognize that people’s income affects their ability to purchase sporting goods (e.g., workout clothes, sneakers) and buy access to fitness spaces like gyms and fitness centers.

While people understand that money limits what you can buy, they also think that income inequalities are inevitable and simply a fact of life. As physical activity is seen as something that requires leisure time and costs money, people tend to think about it as a “nice bonus” or a luxury, rather than as something that should be an integral part of everyone’s daily life. In other words, physical activity is fundamentally thought of as a “middle- and upper-class” hobby, rather than as a basic need for the whole population.

How this pattern of thinking makes it harder to get key points across

This way of thinking makes it difficult for people to recognize that a lack of resources can limit people’s ability to be physically active in more fundamental ways than access to sporting goods and fitness facilities. More specifically, thinking about physical activity as middle- and upper-class leisure means that the issues faced by underserved communities (e.g., safety) are often off the radar for people. They are likely to miss how unsafe sidewalks, lack of controlled traffic, and crime are serious obstacles to physical activity in some communities around the country.

How to address this challenge

Be explicit that physical activity should be a vital part of daily life for everyone, regardless of where they live, what job they have, or how much they make.

Provide a step-by-step explanation of how things like housing, access to reliable transportation, and safety can affect people’s ability to be physically active, especially in underserved communities and places of employment. Don’t just assert that they do.

Opportunities

Opportunity #1: The public is sometimes able to see physical activity as enjoyable.

While members of the public more frequently think of physical activity as painful or uncomfortable, at times they recognize that it can be joyful and pleasurable. When thinking in this way, people tend to focus on recreational activities like team sports or hiking. This way of thinking often brings socialization and recreation into view, which are typically out of mind when people adopt a “no pain, no gain” view.

How this pattern of thinking makes it easier to get key points across

When people focus on the joys of physical activity, it opens up space for them to think about the influence of structural factors. Individualism and fatalism are less likely to get in the way than in the “no pain, no gain” approach described above. When people focus on joy, they become more receptive to other rationales for what can support or impede engagement in physical activity, besides individuals’ inner drive.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Lead with how physical activity can be enjoyable and fun. This will help to avoid cueing the “no pain, no gain” approach and the individualism and fatalism that follow from it.

Give examples of recreational activities that are enjoyable to cue thinking about the joys of physical activity. Include recreational activities that are not examples of intense exercise.

Opportunity #2: People recognize that physical activity has health benefits.

People know that being physically active is good for mental and physical health. They already know that intense workouts can lead to weight loss, increased levels of energy, and better overall vitality. The public also sees that exercising can improve overall wellbeing and mental clarity by releasing endorphins and providing an escape from life’s daily routines.

These helpful understandings still need expanding, as people have a harder time seeing that less intense forms of physical activity can also support health and wellbeing. They also think about health benefits mostly at the individual level, not the population level.

How this pattern of thinking makes it easier to get key points across

This is one aspect of physical activity on which there already is significant agreement between the field and the public. People may not have a perfect grasp of all the specifics, but they do understand that physical activity is good for the body and the mind.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Talk about the health benefits of physical activity at the population level, in addition to the individual health benefits people are already aware of. This will help expand the public's existing understanding of the value of physical activity.

Devote more time and attention to other, less well-understood benefits such as economic or community benefits (e.g., engaging in physical activity makes people more likely to advocate for improvements to their communities). People already know that physical activity is good for the body and the mind. By spending more time talking about what people don't know yet than on what they already know, we can help expand their understanding of why physical activity is so essential for everyone.

Communicating during the COVID-19 pandemic: why highlighting the mental health benefits of physical activity can help.

It is always important to mention the benefits of physical activity for physical *and* mental health, to reinforce the idea that health is holistic. Placing a strong focus on the mental health benefits of physical activity at this time can help prevent communications about physical activity from being drowned out by people's concerns about more imminent threats to their psychological or mental health and wellbeing.

Opportunity #3: The public sees that the demands of modern life can constrain people's ability to be physically active.

The public thinks that the modern world poses a serious challenge for physical activity. They see that current home and workplace demands (e.g., long working hours) limit the amount of time people have to be physically active (i.e., exercise).

How this pattern of thinking makes it easier to get key points across

This pattern of thinking helps the public see that time is an important factor in shaping people's ability to engage in physical activity and can help them recognize that some of the challenge posed by time is out of individuals' control.

It can help people see the need for structural solutions like flexible work hours or teleworking that make it easy for employees to be physically active.

While assumptions about the challenges of the modern world are, in general, an opportunity, they can also lead to nostalgia for a time when people had more free time to devote to exercise, and, because no one can turn back time, fatalism is the result.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Build on the public's awareness of time constraints to argue for structural solutions. Explain that given how little time people currently have for physical activity, it is essential for the country to ensure that everyone has opportunities to be physically active throughout their day (e.g., by making changes to the built environment).

Avoid invoking the "challenges of modern life" too frequently, or too explicitly. It will likely backfire by making people yearn for simpler times past and become fatalistic about the possibility of ever solving the issue.

Opportunity #4: People recognize that interpersonal connections can help people be physically active.

People see that having a "workout buddy" at the gym or attending group fitness classes with others can help keep people motivated and hold each other accountable.

This way of thinking is currently limited to "fitness" settings (e.g., working out at the gym). People also think that these social connections exist because specific individuals decided to initiate them; they don't yet recognize how community-based efforts can also create and strengthen these connections.

How this pattern of thinking makes it easier to get key points across

This pattern of thinking helps people see some of the ways in which social bonds can support physical activity. This understanding needs to be expanded to get people to see the value of wider networks of support that are community-based in addition to interpersonal connections created by individuals.

How to take advantage of this opportunity

Give examples of what community-based support for physical activity looks like (e.g., walking groups, activity programs for seniors). This will help people see that community initiatives can contribute to the strength and diversity of individuals’ social network.

Explain that community-based initiatives can help people engage in regular physical activity by providing them with more opportunities to feel motivated and accountable than they would otherwise have.

Table 1. Challenges and Opportunities in Communicating About Physical Activity

Communication Challenges	
Challenge	Recommendations
<p>Challenge 1: The public has a narrow understanding of physical activity as vigorous exercise.</p>	<p>Be explicit that physical activity includes different types of activities at varying levels of intensity, not just cardio workouts, and that it can be a part of people’s daily routines.</p> <p>Give examples of daily activities like gardening or taking one’s children to the park as forms of physical activity.</p>
<p>Challenge 2: Members of the public tend to assume that a person’s willpower and inner drive shapes whether they are physically active or not.</p>	<p>Lead with structural factors (e.g., safe parks and access to transportation) to highlight how environments can promote or inhibit physical activity.</p> <p>Avoid leading with a discussion of individual responsibility.</p> <p>Explain how systemic factors shape opportunities for physical activity, don’t just assert that they do.</p> <p>Use terms like “options” and “opportunities,” instead of “choices” and “lifestyle.”</p>
<p>Challenge 3: Members of the public tend to adopt a “no pain, no gain” perspective on physical activity (i.e., exercise).</p>	<p>Avoid leading with a discussion of the difficulties of exercising and working out.</p> <p>Emphasize that physical activity can be pleasant and joyful and give examples of what that might look like.</p>
<p>Challenge 4: The public thinks that physical activity mostly happens in dedicated workout spaces.</p>	<p>Strike a balance between mentions of fitness spaces and other types of spaces in which physical activity can occur.</p> <p>Give examples of the types of activities that can happen in non-fitness spaces, like playing in safe playgrounds, cycling on bike paths, “walk and talk” meetings at work, or participating in line dancing at a farmer’s market.</p>
<p>Challenge 5: The public does not fully understand how people’s socioeconomic status can limit their opportunities to be physically active.</p>	<p>Be explicit that physical activity should be a vital part of daily life for everyone, regardless of where they live, what job they have, or how much they make.</p> <p>Provide a step-by-step explanation of how things like housing, access to reliable transportation, and safety can affect people’s ability to be physically active, especially in underserved communities and places of employment. Don’t just assert that they do.</p>

Communication Challenges

Opportunities

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Opportunity 1: The public is sometimes able to see physical activity as enjoyable.

Lead with how physical activity can be enjoyable and fun.

Give examples of recreational activities that are enjoyable and not intense exercise to cue thinking about the joys of physical activity.

Opportunity 2: People recognize that physical activity has health benefits.

Talk about the health benefits of physical activity at the population level, in addition to the individual health benefits people are already aware of.

Devote more time and attention to other, less well-understood benefits such as economic or community benefits.

Opportunity 3: The public see that the demands of modern life can constrain people's ability to be physically active.

Build on the public's awareness of time constraints to argue for structural solutions. Explain that given how little time people currently have for physical activity, it is essential for the country to ensure that everyone has opportunities to be physically active throughout their day.

Avoid invoking the "challenges of modern life" too frequently or too explicitly. It will likely backfire by making people yearn for simpler times past and become fatalistic about the possibility of ever solving the issue.

Opportunity 4: People recognize that interpersonal connections can help people be physically active.

Give examples of what community-based support for physical activity looks like (e.g., walking groups, activity programs for seniors). This will help people see that community initiatives can contribute to the strength and diversity of individuals' social network.

Explain that community-based initiatives can help people engage in physical activity regularly by providing them with more opportunities to feel motivated and accountable than they would otherwise have.

Endnotes

1. A fuller description of the data and methods behind this research is available as a supplement to this brief.
2. Although this research was conducted prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the recommendations in this brief have been designed with an eye towards the pandemic's influence on public thinking about physical activity.
3. The language of each recommendation may vary because they are structured to best explain what communicators should do to increase the effectiveness of their message.
4. FrameWorks' research often uses "strength of will" or "willpower" to talk about individual responsibility instead of the term "motivation" because we want to problematize the public's perceptions that people are primarily driven by internal factors.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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