

Negative messages for experts, positive messages for novices

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WHICH HEALTH MESSAGES WORK? EXPERTS PREFER NEGATIVE ONES BUT THE PUBLIC FOLLOWS POSITIVE MESSAGES.



Credit: Daniel Miller

Is it better to tell people about the harms of certain health decisions or about the benefits of positive health related decisions? Studies that delve into this very question have differing results, however, a new paper just published by Cornell Food & Brand Lab in *Nutrition Reviews*, finds that the type of health messaging that is most effective might vary depending on certain characteristics of the target audience.

Those who are highly involved in the field that a message relates to are more influenced by negative loss-framed messages such as: "If you don't use sunscreen you are more likely to get skin cancer." Co-author Lizzy Pope, Associate Professor and Director of the Didactic Program in Dietetics at the University of Vermont explains: "a medical doctor would be more influenced by this style of messaging because they have the knowledge base to process the message and feel a duty to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Therefore, in this case, the negative nature of the message would be perceived more as a call to action than as a threat."

Alternately, positive gain-framed messages are more effective for the general public who have less knowledge about the subject, feel that healthy behaviors are a choice rather than a duty, and have less firsthand knowledge of the consequences of their actions. Instead they are more likely to look at the big picture and respond to messages that are framed more positively and focus on what is gained by a certain behavior such as, "wearing sunscreen can help your skin stay healthy and youthful."

These findings show how those who design [health messages](#), such as health care professionals, will be impacted by them differently than the general public. When writing a [health](#) message, rather than appealing to the sentiment of the experts, the message will be more effective if it's presented positively. The general public is more likely to adopt the behavior being promoted if they see that there is a potential positive outcome. Lead author Brian Wansink, PhD director of the Cornell Food and Brand Lab and author of *Slim by Design* concludes, "Evoking fear may seem like a good way to get your message across but this study shows that, in fact, the opposite is true—telling the public that a behavior will help them be healthier and happier is actually more effective."

Provided by Cornell Food & Brand Lab

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