The Colorado Health Foundation™

Changing the Story Changes What's Possible

If we work together, health and wellbeing can be in reach for all Coloradans. Since stories shape how people understand problems, who or what they see as responsible, and what solutions feel possible, one of the most powerful ways we can all drive change is through the stories we tell.

At The Colorado Health Foundation, we think about narrative change as shifting those shared stories so that health is understood as something shaped by systems, not solely by individual choices. When that shift happens, fair solutions don't just seem idealistic, they start to feel possible.

At the center of this work are mindsets. Mindsets are the deeply held beliefs and assumptions that shape how people interpret problems and decide what should be done about them. If we want different outcomes, we must pay attention to the mindsets our communications are reinforcing.

When the Story Narrows: Health Individualism

One of the most common mindsets we encounter is health individualism—the idea that health outcomes are primarily the result of personal choices.

Sometimes this shows up in obvious ways. You might hear, "If people just made better choices, they would be healthy."

Statements like this overlook the conditions that shape those choices in the first place, like access to healthy food, walkable neighborhoods, cost of living, and affordable health care. Each of these conditions come together to make up a whole

or a complex system that informs the conditions that individuals can choose from. When those systems stay invisible, so do the solutions that could improve health at scale.

But health individualism doesn't only show up in explicit statements. It often appears more subtly, especially in well-intentioned communications.

The Subtle Ways We Reinforce Health Individualism

Consider this example, "We're helping families build better habits so they can stay on top of rent and maintain stable housing."

On the surface, this feels supportive and practical. But look a little closer, and the story it tells is narrow:

- The problem becomes individual habits
- The solution becomes behavior change
- The systems shaping housing stability disappear

Now compare it to this, "We're working with families to support housing stability by addressing the rising cost of rent and expanding access to affordable housing."

Both statements are clear and accessible. But the second expands the frame:

- It still acknowledges individual experience
- It also makes systems visible
- It points toward shared responsibility

The shift is subtle, but it changes how people understand both the problem and what's possible.

Don't Just Edit the Message, Build It Differently

If we want to move beyond messages that quietly reinforce health individualism, we should do more than tweak language. We must construct the frame differently from the start.

A helpful way to do that comes from communication scholar Robert Entman, who reminds us that every message does four things:

1. Defines a problem
2. Identifies its causes
3. Signals what's at stake
4. Points to solutions

When we're not intentional, those elements tend to default to individual behavior. This exercise helps you build a systems-aware frame from the beginning.

Step 1: Start with the Condition, Not the Individual

Ask: What is the condition affecting people?

Focus on patterns, not isolated experiences. Instead of centering a person's struggle, name what people are navigating, like rising housing costs or stagnant wages. This signals that the issue is broader than any one individual.

Step 2: Make the Systems Visible

Ask: What systems or structures are shaping this outcome?

Bring the underlying conditions that make-up a system into view, things likepolicies, pricing, access, or economic trends. Individual experience can still be part of the story, but it shouldn't stand alone as the explanation.

Step 3: Connect to Shared Stakes

Ask: Why does this matter for all of us?

This is where you ground the issue in our shared values like stability, fairness, and well-being. Show why these stakes matter for everyone. Instead of implying blame, show how the condition affects individuals and communities.

Step 4: Expand What Feels Possible

Ask: What needs to change?

Point to solutions that shift conditions, things like policy changes, investments, expanded access. These do not have to be large-scale change, it can be the small actions we collectively take each day like holding elected-officials accountable, showing up to a town hall meeting, or voting on local ballot measures. If individual behavior change is the only solution, the frame will continue to reinforce individualism.

Bringing It All Together

Once you've worked through these steps, you can build a clear, complete message:

[Shared condition] + [systems shaping it] + [why it matters] + [what needs to change]

For example:

"Rising rents and limited affordable apartments and houses are making it harder for many families to stay stably housed. When people can't rely on stable housing, it affects the health and well-being of entire communities. Instable housing can lead to frequent moving expenses that turn into debt, turns neighbors into strangers, and forces families to make hard decisions between housing costs or other basic necessities, weakening the fabric and connections that make up our communities. Expanding affordable options and strengthening supports can help ensure more people have a stable place to live in strong communities."

A Simple Gut Check

Before you hit post, ask yourself: If someone only read this, would they think this issue is mostly about personal choices or about the conditions people live in?

If your message points to systems, shared conditions, and collective responsibility, you're not just communicating differently, you're helping shift how people understand the problem itself. That's where real change begins.

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Blog

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