

# ORAL HEALTH LITERACY

BECAUSE EVERYONE DESERVES  
TO UNDERSTAND!

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## OVERVIEW

- Health Literacy
- Communication
- Understanding your audience
- Creating your message
- Plain language
- CDC Clear Communication Index
- Engagement and "the value proposition"
- Your role in the health literacy movement

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- An elderly woman develops a life-threatening infection because she does not understand her discharge instructions.
- A young mother pours a drug, that is suppose to be taken by mouth into her baby's ear perforating the eardrum because she does not understand the medication instructions.
- A man answers "no" to every question on an intake form because he does not understand what is being asked.
- A young mother decides against follow-up dental care for her child because she does not understand the dentist's treatment recommendation.



POOR HEALTH LITERACY...  
CAN RESULTS IN MEDICAL MISTAKES

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POOR HEALTH LITERACY...  
CAN RESULTS IN MEDICAL MISTAKES

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- A young boy dies because an untreated tooth infection spreads to his brain.
  - The boy's family lacked resources "at risk"
  - The boy's family was not aware of the importance of oral health and its relationship to overall health
  - Access to Medicaid dental benefits in Maryland was very confusing
  - Navigating the Medicaid system was just as confusing
  - The boy's family was not aware of/or did not understand how to access and navigate the Medicaid system



POOR HEALTH LITERACY...  
CAN HAVE TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES

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- **Health Literacy:** the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand the health information needed to make appropriate health care decisions, obtain health care services and prevent or treat illness.

DEFINITION OF HEALTH LITERACY

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- Navigating the healthcare system
- Filling out complex forms
- Identifying and locating services and providers



HEALTH LITERACY AFFECTS...

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- Sharing personal health information (medical history) with providers and health professionals



HEALTH LITERACY AFFECTS...

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- Engaging in preventive self-care behaviors and managing chronic disease.



HEALTH LITERACY AFFECTS.....

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- How one might understand mathematical concepts such as probability and risk



HEALTH LITERACY AFFECTS.....

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- Only **12 percent** of adults have proficient health literacy
- 36 percent (**90 million**) have below basic health literacy
  - More likely to misunderstand information
  - More likely to have poor health
  - More likely to lack health insurance
- Yet we expect them to be able to:
  - manage multiple chronic diseases
  - comply with complicated drug regimens
  - operate sophisticated at-home medical devices



POOR HEALTH LITERACY IS PERVERSIVE

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- Low health literacy is linked to:
  - longer and more frequent hospitalization
  - increased ER
  - poor health outcomes
  - reduced use of preventive services
  - higher healthcare costs
  - stigma and shame



IMPACT OF POOR HEALTH LITERACY

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- Low oral health literacy has been linked to:
  - limited oral health knowledge
  - lower frequency of dental visits
  - higher rates of dental caries
  - more failed dental appointments
  - higher rates of hospitalization and emergency room usage
  - poor oral health quality of life (stigma and shame)



### IMPACT OF POOR ORAL HEALTH LITERACY

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- "Round-up the usual suspects"
  - Older adults
  - Racial and ethnic minorities
  - Less than high school education
  - Low income
  - Non-native speakers of English
  - People with compromised health status



- Individual factors:
  - Education, language, culture, resources, age, special needs...

### WHO IS AT RISK FOR LOW HEALTH LITERACY?

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- Demands of the health care system
- Individual
  - Confusion
  - Access
  - Navigation
- Provider
  - Rules/regulations
  - Time
  - Training



### SYSTEMIC FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE HEALTH LITERACY

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• **What bugs Americans most about a visit to their provider?**

- #1. Difficulty understanding the doctor when he/she explaining what was wrong
- Of the other top 10, five were communication issues
  - Lack of eye contact
  - Test results not communicated clearly and in a timely manner
  - Felt rushed
  - Long wait time
  - Confusion over billing



**WE ARE PART OF THE PROBLEM**

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- **Health Literacy:** the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand the health information needed to make appropriate health care decisions, obtain health care services and prevent or treat illness.
- Definition places emphasis on the individual
- What about the role of health care provider, organization, system?
- Degree to which the provider, organization or system can offer, present or provide health information so the individual can:
  - Easily obtain
  - Easily process
  - Easily understand
  - Act on information
- **Health Literacy is a shared responsibility**
- Shared responsibility is a basic premise of human communication

**RETHINK DEFINITION OF HEALTH LITERACY**

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- **Communication:** The act or process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior
  - Communication can take on many forms; spoken, written, images, signed, gestured, non verbal, etc.
  - It can use language, sounds, signs (images), or behaviors to express or exchange information or to convey ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else
  - Communication is received through the human sensory system and can involve any or all the senses such as auditory, visual, tactile, etc.

**COMMUNICATION**

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## COMMUNICATION

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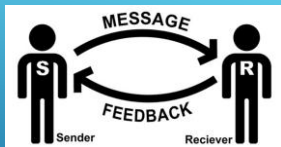
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## THE BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR HUMAN COMMUNICATION

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- We must take the lead – we must accept the responsibility for improving health literacy
  - Public health, health care professionals and providers, healthcare organizations and systems
  - **If not us, Who? If not now, When?**
- We must:
  - Make health literacy a priority
  - Learn skills, access tools
  - Make HL part of every patient interaction
  - Make HL integral to our practice and organization
  - Advocate for HL with leaders and legislators



## WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR IMPROVING HEALTH LITERACY?

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• **Who is your audience?**

- The person or people you are trying to communicate with
- Often the intended user "End User" of the information you are providing
- Often someone who needs to understand what you are saying, someone whose behavior needs to change



**KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE**

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• **Audience Analysis:** The act of trying to understand your audience so that you can communicate with them in a way that your message will be received, understood and acted upon

- Examine the audience as specifically as possible
- What is their level understanding
- What is their level of interest
- Many considerations; age, education, race, culture, interests, likes, dislikes, predispositions, attitudes, values, beliefs, behaviors, etc...



**AUDIENCE ANALYSIS**

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• **Creating your message**

- Define your goal and objectives
- Limit the information
- Communicate simply and clearly
- Focus on action
- Use pictures or visuals to enhance the message
- Make it pleasant to look at, easy to understand and easy to read
- Create engagement
- Test, evaluate, and revise before creating and disseminating your message and/or materials



**FOCUS ON YOUR MESSAGE**

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- After booking a ticket to Dallas from a travel agent, I packed my bags and arranged for a taxi to the airport. Once there, I checked in, went through security and was ready to board. But problems beyond my control led to a three-hour delay before takeoff.
- My flight to Dallas was delayed for three hours.

TOO MANY WORDS

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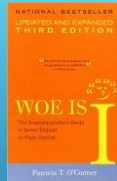
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- "Don't confuse simplicity with simplemindedness."
- "A good writer is one you can read without breaking a sweat." If you want to workout, you don't lift a book – you lift weights."
- "The truth is that the reader is always right. Chances are, if something you're reading doesn't make sense, it's not your fault—it's the writer's. And if something you write doesn't get your point across, it's probably not the reader's fault—it's yours."



Communicate simply and clearly

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- **Plain language:**
  - Making written and oral information easy to understand
  - Plain language document: one where people can **find** what they need, **understand** what they find, and **act** on that understanding
- **Tips:**
  - Limit and organize information, most important points first
  - Break complex information into understandable chunks
  - Use white space to define, separate and organize information
  - Use simple language, define technical terms
  - Use the active voice



PLAIN LANGUAGE:

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- Caries
  - **Cavity**
- Erupt
  - **When a tooth comes in**
- Extraction
  - **Remove, take out or pull a tooth**
- Enamel
  - **Hard covering on outside of tooth**
- Gingivitis
  - **Gums are red and sore**
- Abscess
  - **Sore, wound, infection**
- Anterior teeth
  - **Front teeth**
- Anesthesia
  - **Medicine that puts you to sleep**
- Amalgam
  - **Silver filling**
- Novocain
  - **Numbing medicine**

ORAL HEALTH IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

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- **Why clarity?**
- Communication science tells us that clarity is fundamental for effective communication
- Communication science and related disciplines should inform practice
- It's the law, "Implement the Plain Writing Act"
- **Utah State Office of Education course on Medical Terminology**  
 "Medical terminology is a language in itself. Learning medical terminology can initially seem like studying a strange new language. Once you understand some of the basic rules as to how medical terms are formed using word building, it will become much like piecing together a puzzle."
- "We live in a state of continuous partial attention." Linda Stone

CDC – CLEAR COMMUNICATION INDEX

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- **The CDC Clear Communication Index:** evidence-based tool that uses communication research and related scientific findings about clarity and understanding to inform and guide how we communicate.
- Designed to help you:
  - Develop new communication materials
  - Assess existing communication materials



CDC CLEAR COMMUNICATION INDEX

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- Standardizes and scores the communication process
  - Asks users a series of questions about what they want to communicate and how they intend to do so.
  - Follow a specific order so the most important characteristics of clarity and understanding are considered first.
  - Assigns a value to each answer and totals a score to determine if the communication is clear.
  - CDC-CCI uses a step-by-step process



CDC CLEAR COMMUNICATION INDEX

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- Four primary questions**
  - Who is your primary audience?
  - What do you know about the health literacy skills of your audience?
  - What is your primary communication objective?
  - What is the main message of the material?



CDC – CCI PRIMARY QUESTIONS

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- Main Message and Call to Action**
  - Main message present
  - Main message location
  - Main message emphasis
  - Main message visual
  - Call to action present
- Language**
  - Words familiar to primary audience
  - Active voice writing
- Information Design**
  - Lists
  - Chunks with headings
  - Summary of important information
- State of the Science**
  - What is known and not known about health topic



CCI – CORE QUESTIONS

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- Behavioral Recommendations
  - Behavioral recommendation present
  - Importance of behavior explained
  - Directions for performing behavior
- Numbers
  - Numbers familiar to primary audience
  - Lay explanation
  - Calculations
- Risk Communication
  - Explanation of risk
  - Risks and benefits
  - Numbers, text or visuals combined



CCI – SPECIALIZED QUESTIONS

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- **Engagement:** Creating a relationship with the HC consumer or patient so they are fully absorbed in and enthusiastic about what can come from that relationship.
- Interaction
- Media



ENGAGEMENT

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- **Ask open ended questions**
  - Ask questions using the words "what" or "how" instead of "yes" or "no"
  - Instead of asking: Do you have any questions? Ask: What questions do you have?
- **Check for understanding**
  - Use the "teach-back" method to enhance communication
  - Ask the patient to restate the information in their own words.
  - When the understanding is not accurate, repeat the process until the receiver is able to restate the information to your satisfaction.



ENGAGEMENT THROUGH INTERACTION

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- Non-verbal communication
- Smile
- Listen
- Be sincere
- Eye contact
- Don't let yourself be distracted
- Don't let the patient wait
- Don't rush the patient
- Practice respect



### ENGAGEMENT THROUGH INTERACTION

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- **Social Marketing** is the process of developing and integrating marketing concepts into communication or educational efforts in order to influence behaviors that benefit individuals and communities for social good.
- Social marketing is not social media!
- Social media is a subset of social marketing



### ENGAGEMENT THROUGH MEDIA SOCIAL MARKETING

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### Requirements for successful social marketing:

1. Must have product or service to market
2. Must have a target audience
3. Product or service must have value for the target audience
4. Must communicate the value in a way that will convince the target audience obtain the product or change/adapt a behavior



### BASIC SOCIAL MARKETING CONCEPTS?

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- **Simple:** message must be short, and understandable - easy to get from just a quick glance
- **Impactful:** the message must gain your attention, it must pull you in
- **Engaging:** the message must keep your attention and push the all right "buttons" that will cause you to respond
- **Consistency:** message and visual must be the same across various media
- **Reach:** the message must reach the target audience
- **Frequency:** message must be seen or heard numerous times



WHAT MAKES SOCIAL MARKETING WORK

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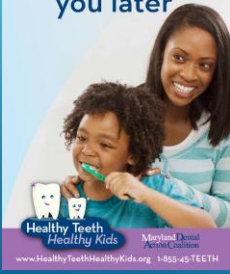
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He'll thank you later\*



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2MIN 2XDAY  
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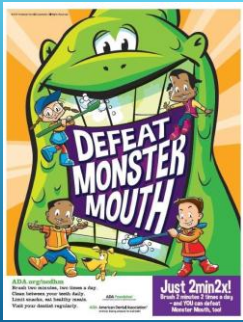
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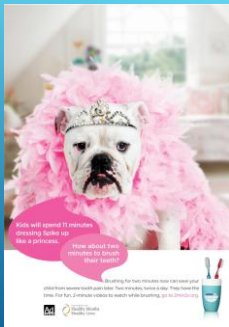
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**BECOME A CHAMPION FOR HEALTH LITERACY**

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- Communication is always a two-way street
- Challenge yourself to:
  - Become a better communicator, listener, health partner
  - Make sure that each person understands and is able to act
  - Spend the time and effort it takes to do so
- Use health literacy/communication tools:
  - Audience analysis to understand and engage
  - Develop, craft and choose appropriate messaging
  - Plain language
  - CDC Clear Communication Index
  - Teach back
  - Engagement – social marketing



**HEALTH LITERACY = GOOD COMMUNICATION**

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- Embrace your role, opportunity, and responsibility to improve health literacy
- Believe in health literacy
- Make health literacy a priority with every patient
- Advocate for oral health literacy in your...
  - Practice
  - Organizations
  - Programs
  - Policy



**YOUR ROLE IS ESSENTIAL!**

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Thank you




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REFERENCES AND LINKS

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**BECOME A CHAMPION FOR HEALTH LITERACY**

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- Train staff: increase awareness of the importance of health literacy and improve employee health literacy skills
  - Understand the audience (Cultural competency)
  - Plain language
  - Teach back
  - Clear Communication Index
- Health literacy in staff orientation
- Present or discuss health literacy at staff meetings
- Circulate health literacy articles and reports to staff and colleagues
- Post and share health literacy messaging and resources



**MAKE THE CASE WITHIN YOUR PRACTICE OR HEALTH CARE SETTING**

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- Identify existing programs and projects where health literacy is a concern. Address improving health literacy to enhance these programs.
- Identify a concern where health literacy is key to the solution. Create and implement a program that uses health literacy to address this concern.
- Identify organizational activities that contribute to improving health literacy. Discuss how these activities should be created, implemented, evaluated, improved, supported and recognized.



**MAKE THE CASE THROUGH PROGRAMS AND PROJECTS**

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- Include health literacy goals and objectives in your mission, vision, strategic plan, programs, and educational initiatives
- Create a health literacy agenda for your organization and convene a group or committee to implement it
- Include health literacy in grants, contracts, and funding opportunities
- Write all educational materials, brochures, questionnaires, etc., in plain language, test them with intended users and revise as appropriate



**MAKE THE CASE WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION**

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- **Brief** leaders, legislators and decision makers about importance and benefits of health literacy
- **Leaders:**
  - Connect health literacy to their organization's mission, goals, and strategic plan
  - Show how health literacy can and should be incorporated into their existing organization and programs
- **Legislators:**
  - Show them how health literacy will improve:
    - health care system, access to care, adherence to treatment plans, preventive behaviors, overall health status, greater efficiency, and reduction of health care costs



**MAKE THE CASE WITH LEADERS AND LEGISLATORS**

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