

How to Bring a Positive Approach to Conversations about Food

Science Facts and Analysis from Science for Georgia

Tip 1: Describe issues as system failures rather than individual failures.

Food insecurity is a multifaceted problem that is often the result of multiple system failures such as the lack of affordable housing, low wages, and reduced access to medical care. These factors can be described as social determinants of health defined as the “conditions in the environments in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.” Lack of access to nutrient-dense food, quality education, and/or stable employment are not caused by individual failings, they are symptoms of a much larger systemic failure. When food insecurity is seen as a personal failing, those who need assistance may not seek it and those who seek it may feel shame for doing so.

Tip 2: Avoid deficit-based language.

Deficit-based language is framing a question or statement in a way that “renders one group less than another group.” Examples of this language include words like “vulnerable” or “low income” to describe or define groups of people. Deficit-based language emphasizes negative statistics and help to reinforce the stereotypes surrounding the very people you are trying to help. No one wants to be defined by a negative term that has a heavy stigma attached.

An alternative is “asset-based” language which focuses on language that describes opportunities or things that are already present in a community and can be built upon. To make sure that you do not gloss-over the issue and make it seem like nothing is wrong, be sure to focus on the facts of the situation and use language that explicitly points out the systems at work that cause the issue being addressed.

EXAMPLE

In a scenario where you are trying to increase interest and participation in a community garden...

Deficit based:

This is a low-income community with families who do not have access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Asset based:

This community is full of hard-working people whose families deserve fresh fruits and vegetables. Currently, the closest store with fresh produce is 10 miles away.

Tip 3: Approach conversations with cultural sensitivity.

Before engaging with marginalized or underserved communities about ways to mitigate food insecurity, ensure that you learn about [cultural humility](#). Cultural humility is “[a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique whereby the individual not only learns about another’s culture, but one starts with an examination of her/his own beliefs and cultural identities](#).” Working on cultural humility can be an emotional task that asks you to question your biases and beliefs. Sometimes, potentially sensitive topics like [farming](#), [cultural foods](#), and [ancestral practices](#) are better left to someone who shares the same or similar cultural background as the intended audience.

Tip 4: Be informed about and avoid healthism and fatphobia

[Healthism](#) is a term that refers to the preoccupation with individual personal responsibility of well-being through lifestyle choices. People with disabilities and other health conditions are [overrepresented](#) among the food insecure, and language and biases that blame them for their health issues can be ostracizing and ableist. Remember that not everyone can achieve “healthiness” – but we can all have access to nutritious food.

Additionally, using weight stigma or fatphobia in attempts to inspire healthy lifestyle changes results in [poorer health](#). A growing body of evidence shows that [physical](#) and [mental](#) health are improved when people are encouraged to participate in healthy habits like eating vegetables and moving more because it will improve their well-being, not because it is attached to weight, body size, or appearance.

Tip 5: Do things with equity in mind at every step.

When creating educational or promotional materials such as presentations, speeches, pamphlets, flyers, or programs, keep in mind who would benefit from it the most and cater to that audience. Ask yourself: Will it reach the intended audience? Will it be well received? Have I done my best to make this as accessible as possible? Marginalized and underserved communities are hyper-aware of when they have been included as an afterthought and word-of-mouth travels fast.

Tip 6: Always be self-critical.

You don’t want the goal of your work to be overshadowed by poor word choice. Get a second and third opinion. Don’t be discouraged if you make mistakes. You can’t know it all! Use these critiques as an opportunity to learn and grow.

