



Empowering Communities Through Health Literacy: Strategies for Effective Engagement and Impact

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About the Speakers

Harneet Cheema, BSc.

Founder and Director of the Health Literacy Program

Harneet Cheema is the Founder and Director of the Health Literacy Program, a community-driven initiative dedicated to improving health literacy and empowering individuals to take control of their health.

Her leadership spans roles in health education and program development, ensuring that sustainable, evidence-based solutions address health disparities in underserved communities.

Manraj Cheema, BSc. Candidate

Manraj Cheema is a student at the University of Ottawa with a strong interest in community engagement, public health, and healthcare accessibility.

As a collaborator in the Health Literacy Program, his work supports the program's mission to improve health literacy and build sustainable partnerships that drive long-term impact.



Pillars of the Health Literacy Program

- Research-Based Health Literacy Intervention
 - Targets adults through a research-based diabetes education intervention, with pre- and post- survey data collection
- Youth Engagement: Instilling Health Literacy Early
 - Empowers youth through engagement events, leadership opportunities, and school partnerships
- Health Kits: Meeting Youth Needs with Practical Resources
 - Provides tangible resources through customized health kits that address real, identified needs

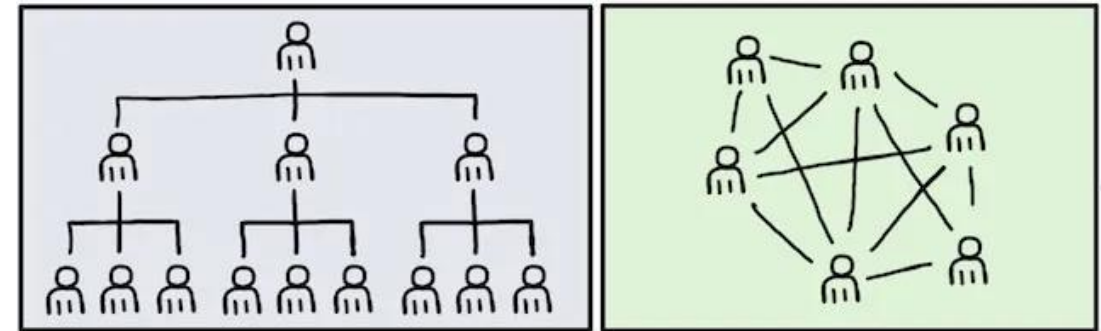


Strategy #1: Listen to the Community First

Why and How We Did this

Recognizing the Role of Health Literacy in Health Outcomes

- Health literacy is a key determinant of health outcomes
- Rural and underserved communities are disproportionately affected
- Effective interventions must be built on real community needs
- Many initiatives falter by assuming solutions without community input
- Research supports community-driven models over top-down approaches
- Programs must be integrated, relevant, and co-designed with the people they serve



Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR): Why It Works



- CBPR actively involves communities in identifying problems and co-creating solutions
- More effective than top-down approaches, leading to better health outcomes
- Fosters trust, ownership, and long-term community engagement
- Ensures interventions are relevant, practical, and sustainable
- Empowers local voices, making programs more widely accepted and impactful

Listening First: Why Direct Community Engagement Matters



- Listening is an essential but often overlooked step in public health initiatives
- Many organizations assume solutions based on data alone, without community input
- Lived experiences provide critical insights beyond statistics
- Direct engagement helps identify real barriers to health management

How We Engaged Key Stakeholders in the Community



- Engaged key stakeholders through structured conversations and group discussions
- Developed a multi-perspective understanding of health literacy barriers
- Stakeholders consulted:
 - Local healthcare providers: Identified common health conditions and patient challenges
 - Community leaders: Provided insight into cultural and socioeconomic influences on health behaviors
 - School educators: Highlighted gaps in student health knowledge and resources
 - Local government officials: Offered perspectives on public health policies and funding opportunities

The Key Finding: A Lack of Health Literacy, Not Just High Diabetes Rates



- Diabetes was a major health concern, but the deeper issue was low health literacy
- People struggled not just with diabetes, but with understanding and managing it

Addressing health literacy was essential for long-term diabetes prevention and care

Health Literacy as a Systemic, Not Just Individual, Issue

- Health Literacy is not just an individual responsibility but a systemic issue
- Defined by the WHO as the ability to obtain, understand, and apply health information
- Systems and communities must ensure health information is:
 - Accessible: Readily available where and when people need it
 - Clear: Presented in simple, understandable language
 - Culturally relevant: Adapted to different populations' needs and belongings



The First Key Lesson: Always Understand the Problem First



- Before designing a solution, first understand the problem – as defined by the community itself
- Why this approach matters:
 - Ensures interventions are relevant and effective: Based on real needs, not assumptions
 - Encourages community acceptance: Programs are embraced when they reflect local input and cultural context
 - Fosters long-term engagement: Inclusion builds trust, ownership, and sustainability

Key Takeaway: Successful programs go beyond just providing education; they build systems of trust, accessibility, and long-term health improvements



Strategy #2: Build Long-Term Partnerships for Sustainability

Building Long-Term Partnerships for Sustainability



- Identifying the problem is just the first step – sustainability is key
- Why long-term partnerships matter:
 - Programs dependent on a single organization or leader risk collapsing when that support is removed
 - Sustainable interventions must integrate into existing community structures
 - Partnerships empower local leaders, ensuring the program thrives beyond founders
- Evidence-based approach:
 - Research shows that multi-sector partnerships improve public health outcomes
 - The WHO emphasizes that lasting programs require strong networks and community ownership
- Key takeaway: Sustainability depends on embedding programs into schools, healthcare systems, and municipal frameworks rather than relying solely on external support



How We Built Long-Term Partnerships

- Sustainability through meaningful partnerships with key community stakeholders
- Key partners included:
 - Local government officials & municipal councils: Provided structural and policy support
 - Healthcare providers: Ensured diabetes education aligned with real-world patient needs
 - Educators & schools: Integration of health literacy into schools
 - Community organizations & businesses: Provided resources and expanded reach
- Youth leadership integration: Established the Youth Working Group
- Long-term impact: Shifted the program from an external initiative to a community-owned effort



Real-World Impact of These Partnerships

- Incorporating health literacy in schools
 - Shifted from one-time workshops and fairs to structured, long-term initiatives
 - Ensured that health literacy remains embedded in local schools even if leadership changes
- Secured nearly \$10,000 in grants
 - Expanded reach and resources, allowing the distribution of health kits for youth
 - Long-term funding strengthened program sustainability and community impact
- Evolving and Expanding Health Literacy Efforts
 - Program is integrated into existing community structures rather than operating independently
 - Ensures that health literacy initiatives continue to grow beyond the original founder

Key Takeaway: Sustainable Impact Comes From Community Integration



- Sustainability is not achieved by doing everything yourself
- Programs thrive when integrated into existing community frameworks
- Long-term partnerships increase program longevity and impact
- Embedding health literacy into local institutions ensures continued growth

The goal is not just to create a program, but to build a movement that persists beyond individual involvement



Strategy #3: Engaging Youth for Generational Impact

Why Youth Engagement is Essential for Long-Term Impact



- Youth engagement ensures long-term sustainability of public health efforts
- Health behaviors formed in childhood & adolescence persist into adulthood
- Early health literacy education prevents future health challenges
- Empowering youth creates generational change in health literacy
- Sustainable impact requires youth to take ownership of their health

How We Engage Youth in the Health Literacy Program

1. Youth Working Group:
 - Official municipal subcommittee
 - Empowers youth to shape community health initiatives
2. Youth-Centered Health Literacy Events:
 - Hands-on, interactive health education
 - Directly integrated into schools & youth spaces



The Health and Wellness Fair: A Hands-On Approach to Youth Engagement



- Engaging students through real-world health experiences:
 - Yoga sessions
 - Smoothie-making stations
 - Mental health jeopardy
 - Booths from local health organization
- Key to success:
 - Built through collaboration with schools, principals, and teachers
 - Health literacy integrated into school culture for long-term impact

Empowering Youth as Leaders in Health Literacy



- Creation of the Youth Working Group
 - Provides a structured, permanent role for young people in community health
 - Ensures youth voices are included in health decision-making
- Roles of Youth Working Group members:
 - Design & implement health initiatives relevant to their peers
 - Provide feedback on health literacy programs to keep them engaging and effective
 - Develop leadership skills to continue advocating for public health beyond this community

Why Youth Engagement Ensures Generational Sustainability



- Long-term impact of youth involvement
 - Ensures health literacy efforts continue beyond initial leaders
 - Encourages ongoing adaptation to new challenges and needs
- Creating a health literacy movement
 - Empowers young people with knowledge and leadership skills
 - Provides real opportunities to influence community health
- Investing in future generations
 - Shifts health literacy from a short-term intervention to a sustained movement
 - Builds a culture of health education and advocacy for lasting change

Key Takeaway: Investing in Youth Engagement is Vital



- Youth engagement is key to sustainability
 - Fosters long-term commitment to health literacy
 - Ensures future generations take ownership of community health
- Building a culture of health leadership
 - Empowers youth with knowledge and advocacy skills
 - Creates a lasting impact beyond a single initiative
- Sustained change through youth involvement
 - Health literacy becomes an integral part of the community
 - Leads to real, lasting change for generations



The Research-Based Intervention: Measuring & Improving Health Literacy



The Importance of Evaluation & Measurement

- Why evaluation matters in public health
 - Ensures interventions are effective, relevant, and sustainable
 - Avoids assumptions about impact by using data-driven insights
- Research-backed approaches:
 - WHO & CDC emphasize evidence-based frameworks
 - Helps track knowledge improvement, behavior change, and program effectiveness
- Using a Pre- and Post- interventional model:
 - Measure baseline vs. post-intervention health literacy
 - Identifies gaps and areas for improvement
- Data-driven refinement:
 - Proves success while also improving future strategies
 - Ensures resources are used effectively for maximum impact

How Our Research-Based Health Literacy Intervention Works



- Designed for measurable impact
- Enables continuous refinement of program

1. Pre-Intervention Assessment
2. Intervention: Educational Workshop
3. Post-Intervention Assessment

Key Takeaway: Measurement is Just as Critical as Education



- Measurement is just as important as education itself
 - Without impact assessment, efforts may not improve health outcomes
- A data-driven approach ensures:
 - Interventions are evidence-based, not assumption-based
 - Programs evolve and adapt to better serve communities
 - Long-term impact is measurable & scalable
- The key to lasting change:
 - Combining community engagement with research-backed evaluation
 - Ensuring health literacy efforts leads to real, sustainable impact



Strategy #4: Ensuring Sustainability Beyond You



Ensuring Sustainability Beyond You

- The challenge of long-term viability
 - Many public health initiatives falter due to reliance on a few individuals
 - Short-term funding cycles & lack of systemic integration hinder longevity
- Keys to sustainable programs
 - Leadership distribution: Shared responsibilities prevent burnout
 - Embedding initiatives into community structures for lasting impact
 - Evolving beyond the original creator to remain relevant & adaptable
- The Ultimate Goal: Ensuring health literacy efforts continue to grow and thrive independently

The Three Pillars of Long-Term Program Sustainability



1. Empowering Local Leaders
2. Embedding Health Literacy into Existing Community Structures
3. Securing Long-Term Funding and Partnerships



The Power of Community Ownership

- Sustainability through shared leadership
 - Programs should not rely on a single leader or funding source
 - Community members & local leaders must have a direct stake in success
- Building long-term commitment
 - Collective ownership ensures adaptability to evolving community needs
 - More invested stakeholders = greater resilience over time
- Sociocultural Sustainability Theory
 - Public health interventions persist when woven into the community's identity
 - When health literacy becomes a core value, it sustains itself

Key Takeaways: Sustainability Should Never Be an Afterthought



- Sustainability must be built from the start
- A program that is rooted in community ownership, embedded in existing structures, and backed by long-term partners has the ability to grow beyond its founders

A truly sustainable program is one that grows with the community and continues making an impact for generations to come



Final Reflections

- Listening to the Community First
 - Understand real needs before designing solutions
 - Avoid top-down approaches; co-create with the community
- Building Long-Term Partnerships
 - Embed programs within existing community structures
 - Collaborate with schools, healthcare systems, and local organizations
- Engaging Youth for Generational Impact
 - Health literacy must be instilled early
 - Youth leadership ensures sustainability across generations
- Designing for Sustainability Beyond You
 - Programs must survive beyond a single leader or funding source
 - Foster community ownership and long-term commitment
- Final Message
 - These principles apply to any public health initiative



What questions do you have?

Please type your questions in the Q&A box.



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