

Message Considerations to Purposefully Reduce Psychological Reactance and Moral Disengagement in Traffic Safety Messaging



Not wearing a seat belt and speeding are two significant contributing factors in motor vehicle-related fatalities. Significant efforts, including messaging, have sought to reduce these risky behaviors, yet a small portion of the population (i.e., about 10 percent) still do not wear a seat belt or regularly speed. Traditional traffic safety messaging may not be as effective with individuals who do not wear a seat belt or engage in aggressive driving (speed, follow too closely, and pass excessively) because of psychological reactance and moral disengagement.

The Traffic Safety Culture Pooled Fund Project, *Guidance on Messaging to Avoid Psychological Reactance and Address Moral Disengagement*, explored psychological reactance and moral disengagement in the context of traffic safety and how adjusting traffic safety messaging could mitigate them and influence the small percentage of people still engaging in risky traffic behaviors.

This document provides message considerations to purposefully reduce psychological reactance and moral disengagement in traffic safety messaging. Considerations are divided into four message components: the style, structure, content, and delivery. Each component includes questions to help traffic safety professionals assess their messaging and integrate what has been learned to reduce psychological reactance and overcome moral disengagement.

For more detailed information on this project and the Traffic Safety Culture Pooled Fund go to:

<https://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/trafficsafety.shtml>.

PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTANCE occurs when an individual feels their freedoms or ability to choose is threatened by a message (or rule, policy, law), so they immediately discount that message and attempt to reinstate or restore some sense of their freedom and ability to choose.¹

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT occurs when an individual willingly disengages from their normal moral standards, overrides their self-regulatory processes, and acts contrary to their normal everyday code of behavior without guilt or regret.²

1 Message Style

CONSIDER THE LANGUAGE THAT IS USED IN PERSUASIVE MESSAGING.

Strong, controlling, forceful language can impose a threat to an individual's freedom of choice.^{3,4,5} Words like "must" and "ought" or phrases that impose a direction like "do this" and "any reasonable person would" sound threatening and can elicit psychological reactance. However, suggestive language that offers choice and uses less explicit directives to persuade can reduce reactance. Phrasing that offers evidence and conveys a choice like "research suggests" or "one option you can consider" is used in messaging that reduces reactance.⁴

- What kind of language does your message use?
 - Check for suggestive, choice language like: could, may, consider, evidence suggests, etc.
 - Avoid controlling, rigid, forceful language like: must, have to, ought, do, or don't.

USE A NARRATIVE OR STORYTELLING APPROACH. Storytelling or testimonials attempt to connect individuals to the message through emotional attachment to characters or narrative. Making recommendations through someone else's experience may lower the perceived threat and negative response.⁶

- How can your message be relayed in a narrative style?
 - Is there an example story or testimonial you can use?
 - How can you shift the message into a story rather than a directive statement?

PREPARE OR CAUTION OF THE POTENTIAL FOR REACTANCE BEFORE IT HAS THE CHANCE TO OCCUR BY USING A FOREWARNING OR INOCULATION MESSAGE. People who received a warning about the possibility of reactance from a message were less likely to feel threatened or reactant to the message upon being exposed. This forewarning even increased message acceptance in some.⁷

- If you know that your message is likely to cause psychological reactance or moral disengagement, what type of inoculation message or forewarning might you be able to use to help ease the potentially perceived threat? For example:
 - You are about to read information from the [name of state] Highway Safety Office that has to do with seat belt use. After reading through the information, you might feel that your freedom to choose whether you use a seat belt or not is being threatened. However, the facts about using a seat belt that are reported are pretty powerful when you think about them, and the suggestions that are proposed about always using a seat belt actually make a lot of sense in light of what is known about seat belt use and the number of lives saved in potentially fatal car crashes.

2 Message Structure

CONSIDER HOW THE MESSAGE IS FRAMED. Generally, messages are either framed as a gain (positive outcomes and benefits of complying with the message) or as a loss (the negatives outcomes or costs of not complying).⁴ Loss-framed messages are more threatening and elicit stronger psychological reactance and moral disengagement than gain-framed messages.

- How can your message be crafted in a gain frame?
- What are the benefits to the audience of complying with the message?

3 Message Content

OFFER BEHAVIORAL CHOICES. Offering choices can mitigate reactance.^{3,4,8} Even just a short postscript at the end of the message that reinforces that the message recipient has a choice in their behavior can reduce the perceived threat.³ Examples of such postscripts are “The choice is yours” or “You are free to decide for yourself.”

- How can you empower your message reader with a choice?
- If your message is not conducive to listing multiple options, how might you include a postscript that includes a notion of choice?

PROMOTE CRITICAL THINKING AND SOCIAL REGULATION. Those who are prone to moral disengagement are more likely to act in disruptive ways, so emphasizing critical thinking skills and teaching skills to recognize disengagement and how to reengage are ways to combat justifications for disengagement.⁹ Focusing on an individual’s inner sense of obligation (moral norms) may also help to regulate behavior.¹⁰

- What moral norms and obligations might you be able to tap into for your message?
- What critical thinking prompt could you employ?

EMPHASIZE EMPATHY AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIORS. Engaging an individual’s empathy has been shown to be protective against psychological reactance and moral disengagement.¹¹ Messaging that heightens emotional capacity to be concerned for others may be a promising strategy to reduce psychological reactance, reduce moral disengagement, and foster prosocial helping behaviors.

- How can your message engage the emotional and empathetic capacity of the recipient?
- In what ways can you promote prosocial behaviors?

ACCENTUATE PERSPECTIVE TAKING. Trying to imagine the world from another person's point of view, also known as perspective taking, has been shown to reduce reactance,¹² and strategies that promote "shared relational experiences that link one's own well-being to the well-being of others" can reduce moral disengagement.¹³

- What can your message do to leverage seeing the world from someone else's point of view?
- In what ways can you promote a sense of shared responsibility for the safety of all road users?

STRENGTHEN SELF-REGULATORY MECHANISMS. Various researchers have suggested that connecting people with their internal set of moral standards can reduce moral disengagement.^{14,15,16} Reminding drivers that their sense of self-pride, self-control, and responsible behavior should be no different when they are in the act of driving and on the road than when they are doing any other everyday activity – their character, values, and morals should remain the same. Messaging for traffic safety should reinforce the normal self-regulatory processes.

- What ways could your message strengthen self-pride and drivers' moral agency?
- How does your message connect or remind recipients of their usual values/morals?

4 Message Delivery

CONSIDER WHO IS DELIVERING THE MESSAGE. For those prone to psychological reactance, the more trustworthy or reliable the source is perceived to be the less reactance elicited with the message. On the flipside, if the source is a government agency or some organization that is perceived to be threatening, the more reactance elicited.¹⁷

- How will the source of your message be perceived?
- How will the audience perceive the source?
 - Close and trustworthy acquaintance?
 - Power-seeking, authoritative voice?
- What will the audience perceive is the motivation behind the source delivering the message?
 - A friend or coworker who cares about them?
 - Their employing organization sending out mass directives?
 - A healthcare provider concerned about their wellbeing?
 - A government official spreading public concern?

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