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UCSB Researcher Examines the Effectiveness of Tailored Health Messages

Advertisers have long understood the benefits of tailoring their messages to match the personality characteristics of their target audiences. A social psychologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara has now determined that the same concept applies to health communications delivered by medical professionals.

In an article published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, David K. Sherman, assistant professor of psychology, and his colleagues examine how messages regarding health behaviors—in this case, dental flossing—can be crafted so that people receiving them are more likely to pay attention and respond favorably.

"Our previous research has shown that messages are most effective when they're framed in a way that's congruent with an individual's underlying disposition," said Sherman, who co-authored the article with John A. Updegraff, an assistant professor of psychology at Kent State University, and Traci L. Mann, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota. That work was described in an article published last year in the psychology journal *Motivation and Emotion*.

"In our current research we're looking at how people process the health information differently depending on whether or not it is tailored to their personality type," he

said.

The earlier research conducted by Sherman, Updegraff, and Mann examined individuals with approach-oriented and avoidance-oriented personality dispositions and identified what the social psychologists refer to as the congruency effect. Approach-oriented individuals are motivated by gain-frame messages, which emphasize the benefits—or gains—associated with adopting a particular behavior. Avoidance-oriented people respond better to loss-frame messages, which highlight the risks—or losses—inherent in not adopting that behavior.

"People are more receptive to messages that match their personalities," said Sherman. "They're more likely to listen to and evaluate the merits of changing their behavior."

To conduct their most recent study, the researchers recruited 136 undergraduate students and separated them into two groups. Using guidelines provided by the American Dental Association, the researchers created health messages expressing the importance of dental flossing.

"One group received the message that positive things can happen when they do floss," said Sherman. "For the other group, the message focused on the negative things that can happen when they don't floss. The results showed that more approach-oriented people responded to the gain-frame message and those who were more avoidance-oriented responded to the loss-frame."

The researchers also discovered that the effectiveness of these tailored messages depended on how much attention the participants paid to them.

"We varied how convincing the messages were, and found this congruency effect only when the message was a strong one," Updegraff said. "That tells us when someone reads a message that is congruent with his disposition, he's really paying attention to it. It changes the way people process health messages."

According to Sherman, the team's findings could have a dramatic effect on how health practitioners share information with their patients.

"A doctor could include dispositional measures along with intake forms, for example, and he or she could be aware of how best to frame a health message," he said. "It presents a potentially low-cost way of boosting efficacy and improving health behaviors."

About UC Santa Barbara

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