



Elevating Connections to the Outdoors During COVID-19

A Rethink Outside Messaging Brief

MESSAGING FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

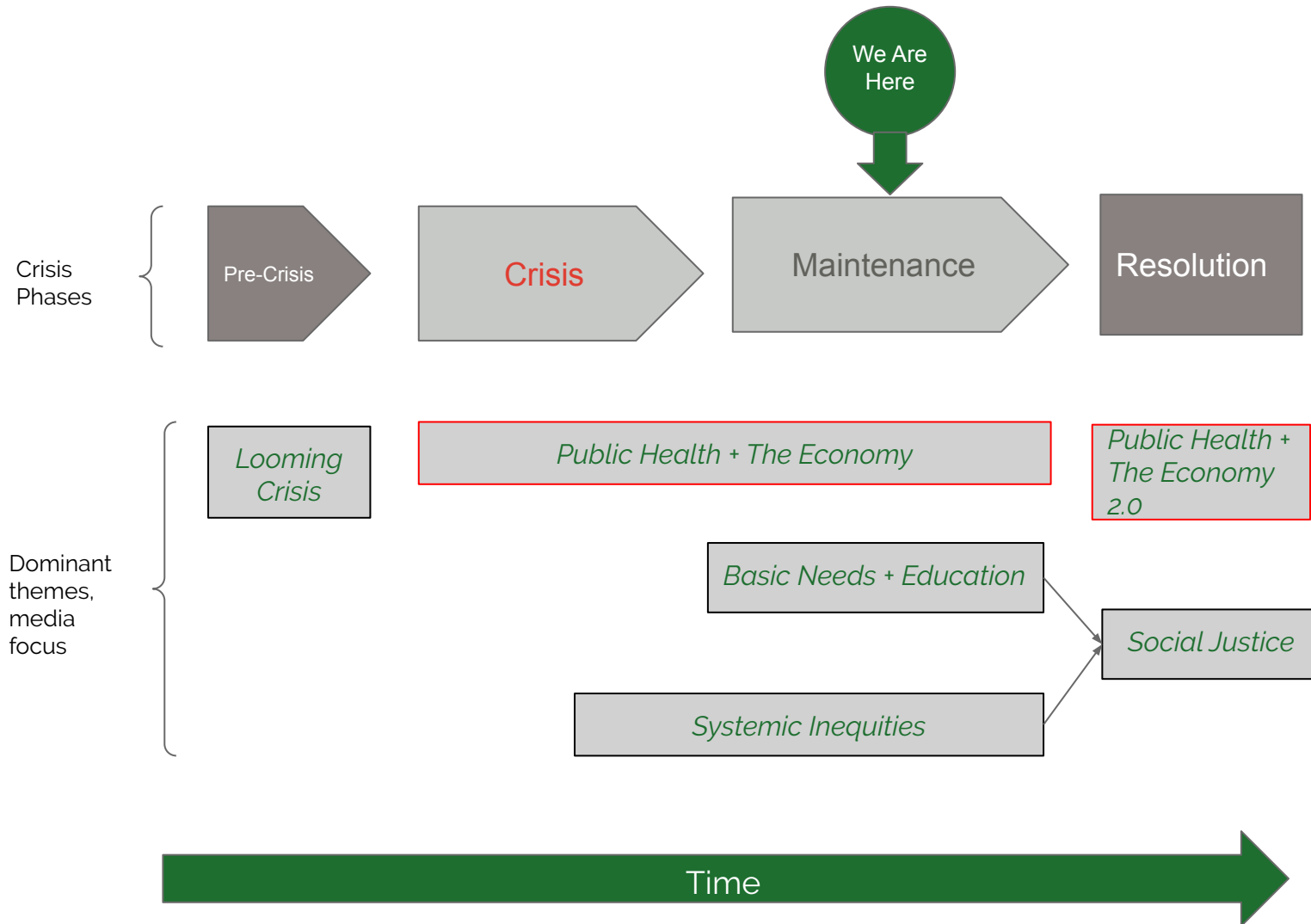
The COVID-19 global pandemic has exacerbated systemic inequities that, while well known within the Rethink Outside community, are finding much broader awareness and attention in this time of crisis.

This messaging brief draws on best practices in frame-based messaging, recent studies of narrative change, and guidance from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on how to communicate effectively and respectfully during a time of global crisis. It offers **a roadmap for connecting the tested values and core message of the Rethink Outside shared narrative with the ever-changing public conversation.** It is designed to serve as a bridge between the extraordinary focus at this moment on public health and public economies, and the conversations that must come next around how to build safer, healthier communities for all.

This approach and new messaging is designed **for use by both funders and practitioners** in communications with stakeholders regarding COVID-19. It is intended to be a tool for your use if you have a need and capacity, and as a frame for your existing communications efforts. It is not a requirement and there is no expectation it be used if it is not helpful for your organization.

One of the most difficult aspects of this time is all we don't know and won't know for quite awhile — how long it will go, how bad it will get, or how the world will look on the other side. **Our goal is to start with what we know now to help you and your work be heard and understood in a time of crisis,** while building toward a shared future of hope and health.

MESSAGING FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW



Soon the national consciousness will begin to shift from the day-to-day fighting of the virus and all of its devastating impacts, and onto what lies ahead. And this will be the moment where, **with greater understanding of the underlying inequities, more people can be brought to a place of understanding** that systemic change is possible, necessary and desirable.

The coronavirus has seeded a much needed conversation around equity - specifically systemic racism - in our country. Because the Rethink Outside community has deep expertise on the issues that should be at the forefront of the new conversation - healthy communities, clean water, a sustainable planet - there will be a perfect storm where opportunity and need meet our missions. **This is a pivotal moment** when how we message our work now will help to shape the post-COVID-19 world of programming, policy, advocacy, fundraising and movement building.

IT'S NOT JUST WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S HOW YOU SAY IT

Communications techniques for times of crisis and uncertainty

Be mindful of timing and tone

An incredibly high volume of information - much of it fear-inducing - is a reality of living through a health crisis. Be cautious to not contribute to this information overload but rather find discreet moments or news cycles when you can communicate with authority and relevance. Less is more.

Pick your moment. When you do communicate, lean on the Rethink Outside shared values (page 8) to clearly show that your issue is central to the overall COVID-19 conversation. This helps bring into view the places or people being overlooked, and that we urgently need to include.

Keeping language asset-based (what is possible) instead of deficit-based (what is wrong) will help orient the audience toward a “what’s next” conversation where healthier communities can thrive.

Show that you are responding to the moment, not taking advantage of it.

Don’t “grab the mic” and center your commentary around healthcare, public health, economics, food insecurity, or one of the other immediate issues unless this is core to your work. You risk appearing opportunistic, self-interested and less than credible.

Do **be responsive to the changing landscape** and look for opportunities to reasonably encourage looking at the bigger picture of the world we envision post-COVID, and how building toward healthy communities now may help prevent the next pandemic. Show that your issue is central to the overall conversation.



***Example:** José González on the impact of park closures on underrepresented communities, in [High Country News](#).*

Communications techniques for times of crisis and uncertainty

Look for opportunities to talk about the positive aspects of interconnection.

At a time when people are separated and isolated, one common experience is that we're all craving more human connectivity. A reminder that outdoor experiences build stronger connections between people, and they can happen in a backyard or nearby park, is an opportunity to be part of the conversation today.

Speak from a 'common good' frame.

Talking about how the pandemic affects us all engenders unity and support. From there, presenting options for improving the common good through health and interconnectedness is a natural communication progression. **Center communications around broad impacts, common concerns, and widely shared implications.** Use words such as "us," "our," and "let's work together to make it right," to keep the focus on the collective outcomes we seek and our responsibilities to each other.

Show that bold, collective action is the way forward.

We need and deserve a robust public response to this crisis. Name those who must take part in the solution and what specifically they can do. **Put yourself in the mix as part of the collective solution**, demonstrating philanthropy has a distinct role in bringing resources and expertise to advance change.

Be specific when offering solutions. Through your messages, make it clear that inequitable access to the benefits of time spent outdoors is an issue that affects all of us and that addressing it creates a stronger society for us all. Such messages must also offer a positive vision of the future.

Clearly connect what we do now to what it leads to later.

This pandemic has brought us to a crossroads. The future can be better, but we need to actively work to make it so. If **through our communications we draw clear lines between today's policies and actions to tomorrow's reality**, we can set the stage for time spent outdoors to be more available and more beneficial to more communities, and hopefully head off the next public health crisis. This is especially critical, given the public funding challenges we anticipate.



Example: *The [University of Chicago](#) on how COVID-19 demonstrates the need for public investments in green spaces.*

Communications techniques for times of crisis and uncertainty

Keep equity and inclusion at the forefront.

COVID-19 is impacting communities of color at disproportionately high rates. The response to the crisis can advance understanding of why this is happening so that trajectory can change. We know that coming out of COVID-19, we will need policies that address varying— and inequitable—health, social, and economic disparities. **Our communications can call for an equity-driven response that prioritizes access to meaningful experiences outdoors as part of the solution.**

BIPOC deserve a strong presence in conversations about how we move forward. All organizations can do this through the sharing of stories, through generating data that illustrates disparities, and prioritizing opportunities to amplify the expertise and experiences within communities of color.



Example: *The Trust for Public Land in the [Boston Globe](#) on the cost to communities who lack access to parks and green spaces.*

Example: *Kim Moore-Bailey on the impact of inequitable systems in [Grantmakers in Health](#).*

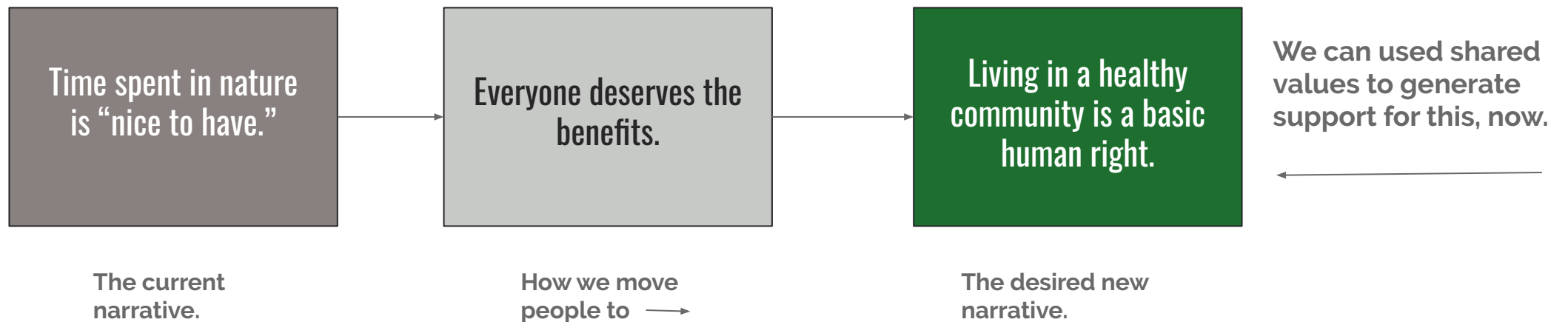
Example: *The inequities exposed by COVID-19 and the necessity of neighborhood parks in the solution, in [Vice](#).*

COMMUNICATING THROUGH THE RETHINK OUTSIDE SHARED NARRATIVE

*Research tells us that in times of social turmoil, communications that **focus on common ground and highlight our interconnectedness** are the surest means to driving attention and action. The shortest path to that common ground is through shared values.*

Ideals and principles—and our sense of right and wrong—are powerful motivators. Use language that activates shared values early and often in communications. This will have more impact than grim facts or distressing stories in isolation.

The Rethink Outside shared values are a platform for connecting with new audiences in this moment and drawing them into the conversations around what lies ahead. The recommended language on the following pages **ties the work of the Rethink Outside community to the prevailing themes during this time** of COVID, while allowing space for each organization to customize and amplify.



THE RETHINK OUTSIDE SHARED NARRATIVE

Messaging Architecture

Core Message

The Rethink Outside community believes everyone deserves the opportunity to enjoy time outdoors, because when people connect with nature we all benefit. So together we bring more people to have more meaningful experiences outdoors, so their quality of life, health and social well being improve and in turn their communities become stronger and more sustainable.

Value Statements

All people should have the **opportunity** to have positive experiences outdoors, regardless of where they live or their social or economic status.

When we make the benefits of outdoor experiences accessible to everyone, everywhere we build stronger connections and **communities**.

Time spent in nature positively contributes to human **wellbeing**, providing a respite from the stress of modern life.

Young people deserve opportunities to learn in, thrive in and appreciate the outdoors, so they can become informed and engaged champions for our natural resources.

The **health and wellbeing** of people and their communities improve when people connect and thrive outdoors.

The shared narrative is synthesized in the **core message**, which is supported by a series of tested value statements.

The **value statements** offer points of connection to various audiences, and open the door to more specific conversations.

USING VALUES-BASED MESSAGING

Values-Based Messaging, Simplified

01

Introduce the Issue

- + *For each particular issue and audience, determine whether to start conversations with a problem to be solved, an overview of your issue or an opportunity for consideration.*

02

Frame

- + *Frame the issue within one or more value statements.*
- + *The five value statements on the previous page are great places to start!*

03

Be Specific

- + *Offer reasons to believe (data) and stories from your work that amplify the value statements.*

04

Conclude

- + *Offer a call to action or solution. Tell the audience how they can be part of the better future we envision.*
- + *Lead the conversation toward the core message/narrative as a summation of the "why" of the work.*

USING VALUES-BASED MESSAGING

01

Introduce the Issue

EXAMPLE

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens the survival of organizations nationwide that provide critical outdoor environmental and science education to K-12 students.

02

Frame

All people should have the **opportunity** to have positive experiences outdoors, regardless of where they live or their social or economic status.

03

Be Specific

Getting youth outside, connecting with the world around them and learning about nature have many documented academic, health and social benefits.

The loss will be felt disproportionately by historically marginalized groups, particularly students of color and students from low-income families, that are most likely to lose environmental education within their local school districts.

04

Conclude

Outdoor learning programs offer solutions to challenges the schools are facing coming out of Covid, and need to be prioritized for funding and partnership.

The outdoors is a resource for learning, engagement and health, and it should be available to all.

Thank you to the UC Berkeley Lawrence Hall of Science for this example.

Messaging Guide

*COVID-specific language and stories
to amplify the Rethink Outside shared values*

USING THE VALUES TO CONNECT TO YOUR ISSUES

All people should have the **opportunity** to have positive experiences outdoors, regardless of where they live or their social or economic status.

When we make the benefits of outdoor experiences accessible to everyone, everywhere we build stronger connections and **communities**.

These statements offer connection to audiences who value equity, fairness, inclusion, justice and the right to live in healthy communities.

Language to Amplify

To come through this crisis, **we need policies and practices that respond to varying—and inequitable—health, social, or economic situations.**

The disproportionate toll COVID is taking on communities of color spotlights the stark inequities embedded in our country today.

Creating safe, readily accessible access to the outdoors for all people can be a step toward building better health and quality of life for all as we begin to address the systemic injustices.

We know people with less access to the outdoors have worse health outcomes than their peers. **Now is the time to come together around solutions** that make populations stronger and healthier, so they are less vulnerable to the next public health crisis.

The closures of national, state and local parks during COVID are seen as necessary to slow the spread of the virus. It is ironic in that trying to keep people healthy, we must cut off access to spaces that are proven to improve the health and wellbeing of those who experience them. **Conversations around park closures or openings are opportunities to demonstrate the power of public spaces to build healthy communities, and the historic imbalance in who typically has access to them.**

Stories to Illustrate

Stories of real-world solutions that are bringing people of all backgrounds into community in the outdoors.

Stories that illustrate the stark differences between who currently has safe access to the outdoors and who does not.

Stories of communities who lost access to parks and outdoor spaces due to COVID quarentines, and reflections on how that has changed their wellbeing.

Stories that highlight creative ways families and students have used their nearby outdoors to forge connections and learning while schools have been closed.

USING THE VALUES TO CONNECT TO YOUR ISSUES

Time spent in nature positively contributes to human **wellbeing**, providing **a respite** from the stress of modern life.

The **health and wellbeing** of people and their communities improve when people connect and thrive outdoors.

These statements offer connection to audiences who value positive health, wellbeing and strong public health

Language to Amplify

The national quarantine has led to a national spike in people's experiences of isolation and anxiety. A common thread that unites us all is our desire to go out, to reconnect and to be part of something larger than our immediate surroundings. **Now more than ever we must prioritize policies that enable everyone to safely spend time in natural environments, and benefit from the senses of calm and community they deserve.**

This moment makes it clear that **each and every person's health is intertwined**. The decisions any one of us makes - whether or not to wash our hands, wear a mask or socially distance - can affect the health of many others in our community. This interconnection can be a force for good coming out of COVID, if we carry it forward into healthy connections between people and places in the outdoors. In this way our connections to each other will help build strong, healthy communities for the future.

Stories to Illustrate

Stories of people utilizing the outdoors to maintain their physical and mental health during quarantine.

Stories that show positive experiences outdoors can happen at a micro level, for example in a backyard, on a window ledge, or from the city sidewalk.

Stories of healthcare workers taking breaks in and finding solace in the outdoors as they work the front lines of the pandemic.

Stories that highlight creative ways environmental educators have delivered outdoor education to quarantined students, and the resulting benefits.

USING THE VALUES TO CONNECT TO YOUR ISSUES

Young people deserve opportunities to learn in, thrive in and appreciate the outdoors, so they can become informed and engaged champions for our natural resources.

These statements offer connection to audiences who value youth development and education.

Language to Amplify

Across all age groups, greater access to parks is associated with reduced stress and greater mental health and well-being. Today 100 million Americans, including 28 million children, do not have access to a safe park near their home.

When the time comes that we can be together outside again, many low-income and under resourced communities still won't have safe access to the outdoors. As we look to improve the health and wellbeing of our children, we need to advocate for policies that bring more safe, open green spaces into all communities.

School closures and the sudden shift to online learning has brought to light great inequities in education. As we look to address these discrepancies through educational investments and policies, the potential for outdoor education must be part of the conversation. **The outdoors is a resource for learning, engagement and health, and it should be available to all.**

Stories to Illustrate

Stories of creative ways families and students have used their nearby outdoors to forge connections and learning while schools have been closed.

Stories of environmental education programs that have persevered through COVID, and the connections and benefits the students have received.

Stories of educators and school administrators rethinking their science programming to include outdoor experiences in support of social distancing.

WORDS TO WATCH

Inclusive language opens doors for more connection and understanding in times of crisis.

Use These:

We, Us, Our

Inclusive pronouns and objects indicate we seek collective solutions, and we see ourselves and our work as key to the future we envision.

Person-first language

Identify people by their potential and aspirations, not by their challenges.

A wide lens

The equity-focused solutions we seek require connection to those we serve, not distance. It is important to frame the needs of marginalized groups so they are not blamed or dismissed - we do this by placing their experiences in the context of the connections and values we all share.

Avoid These:

Vulnerable populations

Avoid labels that suggest weakness or people in need of rescuing. Avoid labeling people at all, because when we objectify people we give ourselves permission to treat them as objects. If your description of a group of people starts with “the,” it is likely you are labeling them.

Inciting fear

Fear leads to scarcity thinking which distances people from our issues and solutions. Place data and stories in context and help people see their part in advancing positive outcomes.

Don't Forget:

Data

Back up your messages with verifiable data, placed in context, from reliable experts in the field.

Stories

Tell human, compelling stories of change that lead audiences to understand our interconnections and collective path forward. Through stories, localize the global pandemic and demonstrate its impact close to home.

CALL TO ACTION

Let's leverage the collective power and expertise of the Rethink Outside community to change the narrative about the benefits of outdoor learning and recreation in the current COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Please use this messaging brief to connect with your target audiences, current and new stakeholders:

Share your story and best practices

Take advantage of support for story writing

Join a strategic storytelling workshop

Pledge alignment with the Rethink Outside values and become a campaign partner

This messaging brief is intended to be a tool for your use if you have a need and capacity, and as a frame for your existing communications efforts. There is no expectation it be used if it is not helpful in this moment.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

[Framing COVID-19](#) / [Frameworks Institute](#)

[Making Meaning in a Global Pandemic](#) / [Narrative Initiative](#)

[Coronavirus Equity Considerations](#) / [NAACP](#)

[Telling the Right Story on Race During COVID-19](#) / [Color of Change](#)

[COVID-19 CommsForGood Resources, Examples and Best Practices](#) / [The Communications Network](#)

[Rethink Outside](#) is a call to action for all who believe that everyone deserves the opportunity to enjoy time outdoors, because when people connect with nature we all benefit. Together, we can unify and amplify the growing movement to lift up living in healthy communities as a basic human right. In doing so, we can reshape the prevailing public narratives around time spent in nature and engage new partners and allies.



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Join the community at RethinkOutside.org.

[Rethink Outside](#) is coordinated by [Blue Sky Funders Forum](#).

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