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It's back to school... Turns out we have a thing or two to learn about health literacy

Do plan members actually understand the health information they hear, watch, and read? The answer may surprise you. And it's worth investigating because to motivate behaviour change—and ensure plan members can effectively assess whether information is accurate and based on scientific evidence—we need to address the often misunderstood issue of health literacy.

Demystifying health literacy

Just when you thought behaviour change couldn't get more complicated, brace yourself, there's more to consider regarding your helping-plan-members-get-healthy-strategy. It's not enough for plan members to just listen to their health care professionals, or just watch a health-related video, or just read health information, they also need to *understand* it—and ideally, take action. This gets at the often misunderstood issue of health literacy.

“Misunderstood” is often the case because plan members who have a high level of general literacy may still have poor *health literacy*. In fact, although you may consider yourself highly literate, you may have poor health literacy in certain situations because health literacy can vary by context. Health literacy is not necessarily related to variables like general reading ability, education, or income. In fact, experts explain that “nearly nine out of 10 adults have difficulty using the everyday health information that is routinely available in our health care facilities, retail outlets, media, and communities.”¹

Not only is addressing health literacy key to motivating behavior change, but it also helps ensure that plan members can effectively assess health information for accuracy, quality, and scientific basis. For instance, to pick on Gwyneth Paltrow for a moment (why not, it seems like the thing to do these days), do we really want our plan members to follow her detox and cleanse recipes that can easily run \$400 to \$500³ a pop complete with *no* scientific evidence? Hopefully, wasting money is the only serious side-effect of buying into Gwyneth's concoctions, however, the negative consequences of poor health literacy can be serious and far reaching. (Don't get us started on Jenny McCarthy...!)

Poor health literacy = Poor health

People with poor health literacy typically have worse health outcomes than those with adequate health literacy. In fact, people with poor health literacy are more likely to have chronic conditions, and they are less able to effectively manage them. Some of the common themes in the research are that people with poor healthy literacy are:

- **Less adherent to medications because they have difficulty following the instructions:** Inability to understand medication instructions or labels often leads to under-doses, overdoses, and inappropriate mixing of both prescription and over-the-counter drugs. In addition, numerous workplace and home accidents are due to difficulties in successfully following safety information.
- **Less able to successfully navigate the health care system:** Poor health literacy can affect the ability to find the right kind of health care professionals and to share personal health information with them. Poor health literacy also makes it difficult to complete paperwork like the necessary intake forms upon referral to various health professionals.
- **At higher risk for hospitalization:** Studies show a higher rate of hospitalization and use of emergency services among people with poor health literacy, which of course translates into higher costs.
- **Less likely to pursue preventive health services:** People with poor health literacy make more use of health services for treating complications of disease and less use of health services to prevent health issues like they are more likely to skip preventive measures like mammograms, Pap smears, and flu shots.

Obviously, addressing health literacy is key to helping plan members improve their health. And keeping health literacy top of mind will help *all* plan members regardless of their level of general literacy because health literacy levels are not set in stone.

Health literacy is a moving target

Health literacy may vary from plan member to plan member— and may vary depending on the context—because a number of variables can have an impact:

- **Rising workforce diversity:** A growing proportion of today's workforce has a first language that is not English. It is also the first time in history that we have four generations all in the workforce at the same time. And there is increased emphasis on accessibility and employee accommodations in the workplace.
- **Health topics are inherently complicated:** Complexity is just the nature of the health-information beast. Health topics are also constantly evolving due to new scientific findings. And of course, there is the ever-dreaded “med-speak”—the unfamiliar medical jargon and insider information that often creeps into health discussions and written information.
- **Complicated health care system:** Navigating the health care system typically includes a myriad of phone calls, in-person visits, and various instructions, forms, and pamphlets. It also typically involves interacting with different types of health care professionals who may all have a different perspective on the issues at hand.
- **In-the-moment reporting:** Have you ever noticed that one day caffeine—or red wine or chocolate—is in the healthy good books and the next day it's out? Whether online, on television or in newspaper articles, the sheer volume of information and the speed at which it becomes old news, seems to fuel this kind of reporting where information is often

presented as “fact,” but it’s not necessarily based on what would be considered scientific evidence.

- **The internet:** With the internet as today’s number one go-to place for health information, the Oxford Dictionary now includes the word cyberchondriac: “a person who compulsively searches the internet for information on real or imagined symptoms of illness.” ⁴ However, due to lack of regulation, it represents a minefield of potential issues: trusting inaccurate or misleading information, making important health decisions based on sensationalized or emotionally-charged information, adopting unscientific health practices, and accepting information just because it provides a sense of control or hope.
- **Savvy marketing techniques:** If aliens land and observe the phenomenon of celebrity-as-health-expert, they are sure to beam right back up writing us off as not worth the time travel. However, with celebrity endorsements bringing in astronomical revenues it’s not just fringe-type buyers; it’s anybody and everybody—it’s people just like your plan members. A dangerous phenomenon for sure as the author of the book *Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong About Everything?* advises: “Cleanse your system of all the pseudo-science babble that flows from many celebrities, celebrity physicians and the diet industry.” ⁵

The fact that your plan members’ health literacy may fluctuate—sometimes high and sometimes low—an essential strategy to addressing health literacy is to focus on clarity. For plan members with low health literacy, clear health information is essential so they are not only able to easily listen, watch or read it, but also understand it, and (hopefully) act on it. For plan members with high health literacy, they appreciate clear health information because it’s quickly engaging and easy to act on—no hassles.

Clarity is king

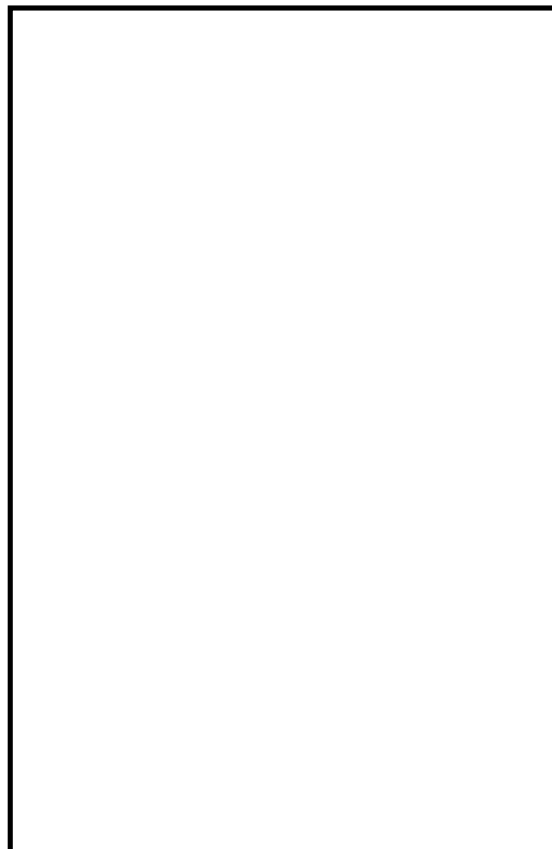
You can bring the language of clarity to your health information in the following ways:

- **Be clear on who you are communicating to:** Increasing diversity in the workplace makes it more important than ever to tailor your communication approach to appeal to specific subsets of your plan member group. If limited English proficiency is an issue, then podcasts and video may be your best approach. For your 20-something plan members, websites and

apps may be the way to go. By contrast, your 60-something plan members may prefer in-person meetings and hard-copy information.

- **Be clear about the sources of plan member health information:** No matter where your plan member health information comes from—like via your health benefits provider or your EAP—make sure they only use credible sources. Whether hard-copy information, websites or other online formats, check for credible sources like peer-reviewed and well-established medical and scientific journals (like Canadian Medical Association Journal—CMAJ), government institutions (like Health Canada) and legitimate health associations (like the Canadian Cancer Society).
- **Be clear on the language in plan member health information:** Clear language writing—also known as plain English writing—uses a range of writing techniques to focus on clarity to enhance reading ease and understanding. And there isn't anything plain about plain language – just because it's clear doesn't mean it has to be overly simple or dull. Make sure whoever supplies your plan member health information incorporates clear language writing techniques like using familiar words, explaining technical terms, adding descriptions and examples, and using visuals to complement words.

Now you're speaking (and writing, and broadcasting) their language! When you address health literacy your give plan members' potential for behaviour change a major boost.



¹ Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion website, Health Literacy, Overview, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Retrieved August 2015: <http://www.health.gov/communication/literacy/>

² The Meaning and the Measure of Health Literacy, David W Baker, MD, MPH1, National Center for Biotechnology Information website, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Retrieved August 2015: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1831571/>

³ 5 Celebrity-Endorsed Health Tips That Are Total Wastes of Money – TIME website, Money Everyday Money health , Jun 9 2015, admin writer, Retrieved August 2015: <http://www.bspsta.com/5-celebrity-endorsed-health-tips-that-are-total-wastes-of-money-time/>

⁴ Oxford Dictionaries website, cyberchondriac, Retrieved August 2015: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/cyberchondriac>

⁵ Timothy Caulfield debunks celebrity health trends, from gluten-free diets to colon cleanses, thestar.com, Lauren Pelley, January 8, 2015, Retrieved August 2015: http://www.thestar.com/life/health_wellness/2015/01/08/timothy_caulfield_debunks_celebrity_health_trends_from_glutenfree_diets_to_colon_cleanses.html