

HOW TO TALK ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS DURING COVID-19

A GUIDE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS & MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

Human rights are tools we can use to steer governments towards making decisions that put the health and wellbeing of everyone at the forefront. However, many governments and media outlets frame human rights as an obstacle to public health. We often reinforce this damaging frame unintentionally. This guide offers readers advice about how to apply a method of communicating known as values-based framing that is more likely to lead people to appreciate the importance and usefulness of their rights in creating the lives they want to live and the communities they want to live in.

Focus on telling the public how we can use human rights as tools to overcome the pandemic.

Explain how different rights allow us to steer governments towards doing the right thing. Media freedom, freedom of association and the right to elect parliamentarians are tools we use to ensure governments take decisions that give support and care to everyone.

Avoid talking about human rights as if they clash with public health.

When we answer a government claim that rights need limiting to protect public health by directly contradicting it, we help create a negative narrative about human rights. Given a choice between protecting rights or protecting health, most people will choose health.

When calling out governments that are making a massive power grab, don't directly contradict their false narrative.

Directly contradicting the narrative that rights threaten health will actually reinforce it. Instead, focus on the real story - a government is removing the rights that allow us to make sure the state is acting in our best interests. Explain how the government is failing to protect public health. If the government is scapegoating, explain how it is an attempt to divide and distract. Coronavirus should not be the focus of your narrative.

When calling out governments that are acting in good faith but may be overreaching, follow these four steps.

1. Explain the freedoms at issue in ways that help people understand their usefulness and importance to every-day life;
2. Agree that we can put them on hold during emergencies, because we look out for each other;
3. Explain the dangers of government overreach with examples;
4. Explain how rights, like access to independent courts, are the solution to regain those freedoms.

When speaking about at-risk groups, focus on 'we' and 'us'.

Don't start with the at-risk group. Start by identifying the values 'we' all share. This broader group includes at-risk groups as part of the 'we', rather than portraying 'them' as others. Then explain how our shared values are not being fulfilled in relation to an at-risk group. Explain how the system puts them at risk and how we can create something better instead.

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Don't	Do
<p>Don't talk about coronavirus as if it's a person, e.g. 'coronavirus kills democracy' or 'civil liberties fall victim to coronavirus'. This obscures the fact that it's politicians damaging democracy and human rights.</p>	<p>Talk about how a government is taking a decision that is bad for democracy. Explain how democratic guarantees (free press, freedom of association, etc.) help us make sure governments act in our best interests.</p>
<p>Don't talk only about a crisis and problems. This will make people fearful and prevent them from being able to see a way out – they are more likely to stick their head in the sand and find individual coping mechanisms.</p>	<p>Balance mentions of the crisis with a much bigger dose of hope/solutions. Talk about what things will look like if we put the solutions into effect. Hope and solutions should take up 3-4 times more space than the problem.</p>
<p>Don't talk about rights as something abstract that need 'saving', e.g. 'governments must respect human rights when fighting coronavirus'; 'we can beat coronavirus without violating human rights'; 'Corona crisis is a crisis for human rights'.</p>	<p>Break down what things a certain right allows us to do. Try to relate it to every-day experiences. The reason human rights are so important is because they give us the tools to create the lives and communities we want.</p>
<p>Don't talk about corona as an 'opportunity' to create a better world in the future or say it has a 'silver lining'. Referring to a phenomenon that kills loved ones as an 'opportunity' makes us sound heartless and insensitive.</p>	<p>Talk about how we have many decisions to make about the future. Corona has been a stress test for our communities. It has shown us where our government has created cracks/weaknesses/traps in the system that people fall through/into. We can choose now to build a stronger, more resilient society for everyone.</p>
<p>Don't say 'more needs to be done' or 'action needs taking' by a government, e.g. 'more needs to be done to stop overcrowding in prisons'. This does not qualify as a solution. If anything, it's likely to make people feel like the problem can't be solved, because you haven't given real solutions.</p>	<p>Say who needs to do something and say what that something is. If you're limited for space, say something like: 'To stop the virus spreading we need the same quarantine measures for everyone. That includes people in confined spaces like prisons. Here are three solutions to avoid overcrowding.'</p>