

EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION IN HEALTH BEHAVIOUR CHANGE IN NIGERIA

Nsikan-Abasi S. Nkana

and

Joseph Jonah

Abstract

Effective communication and education create healthy attitude and belief systems which in turn lead to behaviour change from harmful or unhealthy living to a better life. People behave the way they are used to until they are informed and educated on the right behaviour. This work examined the role of education and communication in health behaviour change in Nigeria, stages in behaviour change communication, importance of behaviour change communication and successful health campaigns held in Nigeria. The paper concludes that since diseases do not exist in isolation, but as a result of interactions between human and animals, there is need for a collaboration between human and veterinary medicine to prevent and control diseases that may likely affect both human and animals alike.

Introduction

People will continue to believe, behave and do things the way they know how to do, until they receive information that opens their eyes to a much better way of doing things. Communication widens the horizon of the individual, community or society. It is the conduit of all education. Education places people at the frontiers of knowledge in order to enhance the understanding of problems and their possible solutions. Both formal and informal education are aimed at building capacity through training to cause an awakening as well as to promote critical thinking in relation to attitudinal change. Change is the process of transformation in any individual or community from an incipient status to another position. Change is a necessary phenomenon that occurs with the aid of consistent persuasion. Each of us has a set of belief system that we learned during our youthful age. Some of these beliefs lead to both healthy and unhealthy behaviours. Some factors that stimulate changes in people's behaviours include education, family, friends, religion, media, community or environment.

Behaviour change communication is a planned communication that is made towards behavioural modification of an individual, group, community or the society at large. Precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance are steps or stages in behaviour change. LaMorte (2016) observes that education and communication play an essential role in encouraging positive health and lifestyle behaviour change. This can involve informing individuals about the foredeals of healthy behaviours such as regular exercise,

healthy eating habit, stress management, and avoiding harmful actions or attitudes like smoking or excessive alcohol consumption.

Communication and Behaviour

Effective communication plays a crucial role in diverse aspects of human interaction and behaviour (Arlinghaus and Johnston, 2017). The following points highlight how communication can influence and shape individual and collective behaviours:

i. Communicating Intentions and Goals:

Communication is a powerful tool for conveying intentions, objectives, and goals. When individuals or groups clearly communicate their intentions and goals, it helps create a shared understanding and alignment among stakeholders. This alignment can drive cooperation, collaboration, and coordinated efforts toward achieving common objectives (Suleiman, 2022). Whether in personal relationships, business settings, or social initiatives, transparent communication about intentions and goals fosters trust and reduces misunderstanding.

ii. Influencing Social Norms and Expectations:

Communication plays a pivotal role in shaping and reinforcing social values, beliefs and norms in a person. Norms are unwritten rules that guide behaviour within a society or group. Effective communication can influence these norms by promoting certain behaviours, values, or beliefs, and discouraging negative tendencies. Through media advertising, public messaging, and interpersonal interactions, communication can challenge existing norms and introduce new perspectives, eventually leading to shifts in collective behaviour. For instance, public health campaigns can use communication strategies to promote behaviours such as wearing seatbelts, quitting smoking, or adopting healthier diets, ultimately altering societal norms.

iii. Overcoming Barriers to Behaviour Change:

People often encounter obstacles when attempting to change their behaviour, whether adopting healthier habits, embracing sustainable practices, or making other positive changes. Effective communication can help overcome these barriers by providing information, motivation, and support. By addressing concerns, providing clear instructions, and offering incentives, communication campaigns can empower individuals to make desired behavioural changes. Tailored messaging, feedback loops, and social support networks can reinforce these efforts and assist individuals in navigating challenges on their path to behaviour change. Effective communication serves as an encouragement for diverse aspects of behaviour, ranging

from personal intentions and goals to societal norms and expectations. By conveying messages clearly, influencing perspectives, and addressing obstacles, communication plays a crucial function in guiding individuals and groups toward positive behavioural outcomes.

Health Communication

The numerous health challenges in Nigeria call for effective communication approaches such as media advocacy, social mobilization, edutainment among other approaches to address health related issues and to equip individuals and communities to make informed decision about their health. Health communication is an essential part of public health, which plays a crucial role in information dissemination and promotion of behavioural change. Health communication is concerned with awareness creation and how to encourage people to adopt healthy lifestyle such as disease prevention, family planning, immunization, good hygiene culture, among others. Health communication is the study and use of communication approaches to inform and influence individual and community decision to promote healthy behaviours (Sixsmith *et al.*, 2014). The essence of health communication is to change peoples' behaviour about certain health issues. Guttman and Salmon (2004) assert that health communication helps in creating awareness of new infections, chronic diseases and the promotion of recommended treatments.

The world is heading towards One-health. One-health is a global movement that involves a holistic, trans-disciplinary, multi-sectional strategy adopted to manage human, animal and environmental health. The Nigeria government keyed into the global initiatives by launching the One-health strategic plan in 2019 at Abuja. The One health initiative involves the Federal Ministries of Health, Agriculture and Environment (Batta, 2024). The major concerns of one-health is to bring changes to human health and the environment by transforming individual or organisms from its incipient position to another position. Government alone cannot do it. Hence, it becomes necessary for the health communicators to communicate and educate people about this initiative for the purpose of protecting and restoring our natural habitats, securing our health and to have a healthy environment for human, animal and plant habitation. Satcher (2000) notes that accuracy, consistency, repetition, cultural competence, reliability, availability, balance and timeliness are effective elements of health communication. Health communication is an extensive area that includes risk communication, health and policy promotion, focus communication, patient and supplier communication, health literacy and health education. Health education messages are transmitted through diverse communication channels to inform and educate people about certain harmful behaviours.

Health Education

The primary concern of behaviour change is the provision of information to disseminate the knowledge base of the people so as to take reasonable decisions and engage in behavioural change. Education provides individuals with prerequisite information and knowledge about the risks and benefits associated with certain behaviours. Education stimulates or induces change and serving as a cornerstone for personal and societal advancement. It equips individuals with the tools needed to adapt to a changing landscape, enabling them to confront challenges and embrace opportunities. Through education, people are empowered to challenge the way things are, question assumptions, and drive innovation. Education helps in fostering critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, creativity and empowering individuals to become active participants in shaping their communities or societies.

Through education, people have acquired skills and information. The acquisition of skills and information is a fundamental outcome of education that empowers individuals to succeed in diverse spheres of life. From practical skills to advanced academic knowledge, education endows people with the competence to navigate complex professional environments. These skills do not only enhance employability but also instill a sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy. As individuals become proficient in various areas, they gain the autonomy to make informed decisions, pursue their passions, and contribute meaningfully to society

Education is not limited to the dissemination of facts; it also shapes attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives. Exposure to various cultures, ideas, and viewpoints encourages tolerance, empathy, and a wider understanding of the world. Education encourages open-mindedness and promotes critical engagement with societal issues. Individuals are equipped to become agents of positive change through education. Education enables communities or individuals to recognize the importance of ethical considerations, promoting responsible and compassionate decision-making. Directing messages to solve specific needs of an individual or community can encourage and stimulate behaviour change. As individuals, communities and societies embrace education, they overcome challenges, contribute meaningfully, and create a better future. We can collectively work towards a more inclusive, innovative, and enlightened world via recognizing education and transformative potential (Edgar, 2012).

Health education is an essential component of health communication in Nigeria. Individuals and communities need to be educated about symptoms, preventive measures and diverse health care services where they can be well informed about their health status. People can be educated on their reproductive health, mental health, communicable and non-

communicable diseases. Health education is instrumental in diverse prevention. Through frequent transmission of information about certain health complications such as diabetes, cancer, hepatitis etc., individuals or communities involved will be educated to take preventive measures. Olalekan, Adebimpe & Olawoye (2018) note that health education campaigns have been successful in promoting immunization programmes leading to increased vaccination coverage and reduction in vaccine – preventable diseases in Nigeria. They further observe that health education interventions can enhance positive health behaviour changes, such as improved hygiene cultures, reduced high in-take of alcohol and tobacco consumption in the nation (Olorunfemi, Oyewole & Olorunfemi, 2019). Health education facilities such as schools, community centers and health care facilities can provide educational programmes to teach people about living healthy lifestyles or behaviours.

Behaviour Change Communication

Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) is an interactive process with individuals or communities to create specific messages and methods using diverse communication channels to develop positive behaviours, enhance and maintain individual, community and societal behaviour change. For instance, communication is important in educating families with history of HIV/AIDS and diabetes. Communication helps the HIV/AIDS and diabetic patients and their family members to have access to correct information about the illness, complications, treatment, advantages of life style modification, and available health care services. Information alone is insufficient to support behaviour change. Influencing healthy behaviours and creating a supportive social environment is also important. It requires desire for learning and participation of patient, family and community. Before individuals or communities change their behaviours, they must first understand basic facts about HIV/AIDS and diabetes, change life style, know importance of modifying diet, regular exercise and be given access to services. They must have social support of family and community for behaviour change.

Iyorza (2015) notes the five stages of behaviour change thus:

- i. **Precontemplation Stage:** At this stage, the individual is not ready to change his or her behaviour even in the next six months. Being uninformed about the repercussions of one's behaviour can cause a person to be in this stage for long.
- ii. **Contemplation Stage:** Contemplation is a stage where an individual is willing to change his or her behaviour in the next six months. At this stage, he or she is aware of the advantages and disadvantages of changing his or her behaviour. He or she is getting ready to change in the next six months. However, individuals at this stage are not ready for traditional action-oriented programmes that expect him or her to act instantly.

- iii. **Preparation Stage:** This is the stage people or individuals are willing to take instant action usually measured as the next month, or in the next one month. At this level, the individuals consult their doctors, buy self-help books, join health education classes and rely on self-change approach.
- iv. **Action Stage:** This is a stage in which people have made specific changes in their lifestyles within the past six months. In most cases, they have to attain a criterion that scientists and professionals agree is sufficient to reduce risk of disease. For instance, reduction in the number of cigarettes in-take in a day, week or month is not an acceptable action. Rather, total abstinence from smoking culture could suffice.
- v. **Maintenance Stage:** This is a stage where individuals have made specific changes in their lifestyles and are working seriously to prevent any temptation that will make them fall back or go back to their previous behaviour. At this level, people are less tempted. Based on self-efficacy data researchers have estimated that maintenance lasts from six months to about five years.

Importance of Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) in Health

These include:

- a) Increasing knowledge: BCC can ensure that people are given the basic facts about their health in a language or visual medium (or any other medium that they can understand and relate to).
- b) Promoting attitude change: BCC can lead to appropriate attitudinal changes in people living with diabetes, cancer, HIV/AIDS, among many others.
- c) Reducing stress of patient and family: Behaviour change communication provides information about the treatment, facilities, services in government and private health sector and self-help groups.
- d) Creating demand for information and services: BCC can urge individuals and communities to demand information on any health related matter and appropriate services.
- e) Promoting services for prevention, care, and support: BCC promotes services for people living with HIV/AIDS and diabetic patients and their family members; support groups for HIV/AIDS and diabetics; treatment and care for other problems due to HIV/AIDS and diabetes; and also extend social and economic support.
- f) Improving skills and making patients independent: BCC programmes can focus on teaching new skills and behaviours, such as regular exercise, modifying diet, taking

insulin injection, precautions when alone or driving or traveling. This will help in building confidence and taking decisions independently.

Behaviour change is a complex process that can be influenced by various factors. Education provides individuals with the necessary knowledge and awareness of the benefits and risks associated with certain behaviours. Without proper understanding, behaviour change is unlikely to occur (Anonim, 2017). People are more likely to change their behaviour when they are motivated by personal or external incentives such as health improvements, financial gains, social recognition, or rewards. Individuals assess the perceived benefits of adopting a new behaviour against the perceived barriers or obstacles. Behaviour change is more likely when the perceived benefits outweigh the barriers. Individual beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding health and wellbeing can impact the willingness to change behaviour. Positive health beliefs can encourage proactive behaviour change (Gurupada & Kola, 2019). Social interactions and the influence of friends, family, peers, and cultural norms play a significant role in shaping behaviour. People often conform to social norms and seek approval from their social circles. Availability of resources, such as time, money, facilities, and support, can either facilitate or hinder behaviour change. Limited access to resources may act as a barrier.

Understanding these factors and their interplay can help educators, communicators, and behaviour change practitioners design effective strategies to convey information, inspire change, and promote positive outcomes. In today's rapidly evolving world, the empowerment of individuals and societies is closely intertwined with the acquisition of knowledge. Education stands as a powerful conduit for change, enabling people to acquire skills, information, and perspectives that shape their attitudes and perceptions (Nyunt et al., 2015). This interconnected process is pivotal in driving progress, fostering innovation, and promoting positive societal transformation.

Instances of Successful Behaviour Change Campaigns in Nigeria

i. Nutrition, Education and Behaviour Change:

The "Alive & Thrive" programme in Nigeria has successfully combined education and communication to improve infant and young child feeding practices. Through various media channels, this initiative has promoted exclusive breastfeeding and appropriate complementary feeding, resulting in improved child nutrition.

ii. HIV/AIDS Awareness and Prevention:

Nigeria has implemented successful behaviour change campaigns to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and promote safe practices. These campaigns have utilized various

communication channels, including mass media, community outreach, and peer education. As a result, there has been increased awareness, improved condom use, and a decline in new HIV infections.

iii. Polio Eradication Campaign:

Nigeria successfully tackled the challenge of polio through a comprehensive behaviour change campaign. The Nigerian government along with international organizations like WHO and UNICEF, launched awareness programmes and engaged with local communities to address vaccine hesitancy. This campaign led to a significant reduction in polio cases and contributed to the eventual eradication of the disease in the country (Udoudom, Saawuan & Igiri, 2023).

iv. Almajiri Education Initiative:

The Almajiri Education Initiative focuses on providing formal education to out-of-school children, particularly in Northern Nigeria. Through this initiative, many Almajiri (Quranic school students) have been integrated into the formal education system, improving their access to quality education and enhancing their future prospects.

v. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Education Programmes:

Organizations like the "Bridge International Academies" have introduced Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics education programmes in Nigeria. These initiatives have enhanced students' skills tremendously, preparing them for future careers in technology and innovation.

vi. Voter Education and Civic Engagement:

Every four years, general elections are held in Nigeria to provide opportunity for eligible voters to elect their leaders. Nigerians have seen successful voter education campaigns that use various communication channels to inform citizens about their rights and responsibilities as voters. These campaigns have contributed to increased voter turnout and civic engagement (Udoudom, Saawuan & Igiri, 2023). These examples showcase how behaviour change campaigns, educational initiatives, and the education communication nexus have been effectively leveraged in Nigeria to address various social and developmental challenges.

vii. Girl-Child Education Initiatives:

Several organizations in Nigeria have worked to promote and support girl-child education. "Girls' Education Project," which aims to improve the enrollment and retention of girls in schools, is a typical example. Through intense campaigns and

community engagement, the initiative has led to increased enrollment and reduced dropout rates among girls (Udoudom, Saawuan & Igiri, 2023).

Synergy of Education and Communication

Education and communication are closely intertwined and often go hand in hand. Nancy and Dongre (2021) point out that effective communication is crucial in conveying educational information, while education provides the knowledge and understanding necessary for effective communication. Effective communication and education can influence policy-makers' decision or advocate for policies that prioritize public health. By providing evidence-based information, awareness creation, stakeholders engagement, these practices can lead to the implementation of policies that support health promotion and disease prevention (Olorunfemi *et al.*, 2019).

Nancy and Dongre (2021) note the following roles of education and communication:

- i. **Information Dissemination:** Education involves the imparting of knowledge, skills, and values to individuals. Communication is the vehicle through which this information is shared. Effective communication ensures that educational messages are clear, accurate, and comprehensible to the intended audience.
- ii. **Two-Way Exchange:** Communication allows for a two-way exchange of information. Educators can gather feedback from their audience through communication channels, such as discussions, surveys, or interactive sessions. This feedback informs the adaptation and improvement of educational content.
- iii. **Engagement and Participation:** Effective communication strategies, such as active listening, engaging storytelling, and interactive presentations, enhance learner engagement and participation in educational activities. Engaged learners are more likely to grasp and retain the information being conveyed.
- iv. **Contextualization:** Communication helps contextualize educational content by relating it to real-life situations, personal experiences, or societal issues. This aids in making the educational material relevant and relatable to the learners.
- v. **Behavioural Change:** Communication plays a vital role in motivating and inspiring behavioural change. Well-communicated educational messages can influence attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, fostering positive change in individuals and communities.

Other contexts of Education and Communication

1. Societal and Cultural Influences on Behaviours:

Education and communication can help address societal and cultural factors such as peer influence, cultural sensitivity and social norms that influence behaviour. Also, movies, television shows, and social media can influence behaviours and attitudes. Positive portrayals of desired behaviours can lead to emulation. In each of the above mentioned points, effective education and communication strategies involve clear messaging, engaging content, targeted outreach, and a deep understanding of the specific audience's needs and motivations (Milgrom, 2015). Collaborations between government agencies, NGOs, educational institutions, businesses, and community organizations are often necessary to achieve widespread behaviour change and create a positive impact on human health, as well as a healthy environment, and society.

2. Environmental and Sustainable Practices:

Education and communication are essential for encouraging environmentally friendly and sustainable practices. People need to know and understand the impact of their actions on the environment and be motivated to adopt more sustainable behaviours. Some of the effective approaches to environmental sustainability practices are schools, museums, and community organizations. These can educate people about ecological systems, climate change, and the importance of conservation. Governments and environmental groups use communication campaigns to raise awareness about issues like recycling culture, STEM, green economy, renewable energy and organic farming practices to sustain a healthy environment for man, animal and plant habitation. Also, companies can educate their employees and customers about their efforts to reduce their environmental footprint and encourage similar actions.

Conclusion

Through intense dissemination of accurate communication and education, individuals would be equipped with the necessary knowledge they need to make an informed decisions and adopt healthier behaviours. The need for collaboration between educators and communicators can lead to more effective and holistic strategies for behaviour change. Educators possess expertise in teaching and educating curriculum development, pedagogy, and understanding learning needs, while communicators possess expertise in message creation to reach various audiences, and utilizing diverse media channels. The adoption of technology such as mobile apps and virtual reality experiences can create or enhance immersive and interactive learning environment that encourage positive and healthy behaviour change.

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