



# *Essentials of* Health Behavior

Social and Behavioral Theory in Public Health

SECOND EDITION

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# Dedication

*This book is dedicated to my family for their support and tolerance; to all those at The George Washington University and at Jones & Bartlett Learning who are behind the Essential Public Health series; and, most importantly, to all those already working or planning to work on the front lines to help improve the lives and health of so many people in the United States and around the world. Your work is a testament to humanity at its best.*



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# Prologue

*Essentials of Health Behavior* was one of the first books in the *Essential Public Health* series, which now includes over 20 books. It set a standard for the series. Dr. Edberg's writing engages students as he takes them on a journey connecting theory and practice while reassuring them every step of the way. The *Second Edition* continues in this tradition with its emphasis on making theory come to life using stories and scenarios. A new chapter on multilevel theories takes on the challenge of integrating the multiple factors that influence behavior. Dr. Edberg's writing allows students to understand these complex theories in ways that relate to their lives.

From cigarette smoking to eating habits to our daily routine, our everyday behaviors affect our health in ways that we often fail to appreciate or even notice. Beyond our individual behaviors, there are larger social and population forces at play in all of our lives, which serve to mold and further reinforce our individual behavior.

*Essentials of Health Behavior* skillfully combines an emphasis on individual behavior with a clear focus on the social factors that influence the "big picture" population health perspective. Mark Edberg's approach grounds the practical everyday behaviors within key theories of human behavior drawn from the social sciences. Building on this understanding of health behavior, *Essentials of Health Behavior* examines a range of methods for changing behavior and applies these to programs in health promotion and disease prevention.

Edberg brings the lessons of extensive teaching experience at both the undergraduate and graduate levels to his writing, as well as his training and experience as an anthropologist and social researcher with a public health focus. At The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services and its Columbian College of Arts and Sciences, he taught health behavior courses as well as courses that focus on the impact of culture on health. As an anthropologist, he has a unique understanding of the impact cultural and social factors have on individual behavior.

*Essentials of Health Behavior* can be used in social and behavioral sciences as well as public health curriculums that look at the many factors that affect health behavior. Health behavior is a key building block for a curriculum in health education. In addition, health professions educators in the clinical disciplines are increasingly coming to appreciate that good outcomes rest on understanding the social and economic factors that affect individual behavior. As the behavioral and social sciences become more integrated into preparation for the clinical professions, the second edition of *Essentials of Health Behavior* provides a structured curriculum designed to fulfill these needs.

Students in a wide range of disciplines will benefit from *Essentials of Health Behavior*. They will take away key concepts that will serve them well for many years to come. They will find themselves engaged in a voyage of discovery and enjoy the journey.

**Richard Riegelman, MD, MPH, PhD**  
Editor, *Essential Public Health* series



# Preface

Health promotion, education, and prevention programs ultimately focus on *changing health behavior*. But what do we mean when we say “health behavior?” Is health-related behavior really something different than any other behavior? There is no reason to think it is. To help us understand it, we can draw from the fascinating, multidisciplinary, and ongoing quest to try and understand *human behavior* in general. That, of course, is a big task, and no book can cover that in any adequate way. What we can do is provide an introduction to the kinds of theoretical approaches that are used, or could be used, in developing and implementing health promotion programs, and to show how such approaches are applied to real-life settings.

It is my hope that combining these elements together in one book will fill an important gap for undergraduate programs in public health, and will provide an important piece of the foundation necessary for understanding the field. It is important that students in public health have a solid grounding in social/behavioral theory, and particularly important that they gain a general understanding in this subject area before they proceed to a graduate program or move to direct involvement in prevention and health education programs that apply such theory. Why? Because proper use of theory in public health means, in part, the ability to place particular theoretical approaches in context, to have some sense of their origins, their underlying assumptions, their strengths and weaknesses, and the programs and situations for which they might or might not be most applicable.

More and more, public health interventions *and their evaluations* are guided by theoretical frameworks. Program goals, program components, and the types of data used as evidence of program success are thus built on specific theoretical underpinnings. Without at least a general background, application of theory can all too easily become formulaic and inappropriate form without substance. A key aim of this book, in that sense, is to provide the groundwork for understanding, assessing, and effectively applying theory.

In that spirit, *Essentials of Health Behavior* is designed to:

- 1) Introduce students to the relationship between behavior and a selection of major health issues;
- 2) Provide an introductory background to the kinds of social and behavioral theories that guide our understanding of health-related behavior and that form the background for health promotion and prevention efforts; and
- 3) Explore some of the ways in which these theories and approaches are used in applied health promotion efforts.

In the first section, we will introduce the relationship of behavior to health, review a sample of current and ongoing health problems (domestic and international), and, in a broad sense, discuss the relationship of *behavior* to those health problems. In the second section, we will provide a context from which to understand theory, and survey theoretical perspectives from psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines that offer explanations of human behavior, keeping in mind that health behavior is one domain of human behavior in general—thus linking the field of health promotion and prevention to the broader context of social/behavioral theory. The third section will

introduce students to theory-based program planning and application, providing real-world examples across a range of settings—including community, school, and workplace programs, global health, mass media/communications, and programs targeting special populations. This section will also show how theory links program design, implementation, and evaluation. In the fourth section, current issues in the applied field of health behavior/health promotion will be reviewed, and we will present some of the occupational and career possibilities for which material in the book is relevant.

### **NEW TO THE SECOND EDITION**

For the *Second Edition*, data and other information have been updated throughout, with additional applied examples of theoretical applications. A new chapter on multilevel theory has been added in the second section because of the growing recognition that complex community contexts require interventions that address multiple levels.

# Acknowledgments

One can never attempt to do a book alone, and with that in mind, I am deeply grateful to a number of individuals who provided invaluable support and assistance in preparing this book:

- Dr. Richard Riegelman, MD, MPH, PhD, for his leadership in compiling the series and for shepherding everyone through the process.
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- The Department of Prevention and Community Health, School of Public Health and Health Services at The George Washington University, for overall support and expertise.

And of course, thanks to my wife Haykham and children Eleazar and Jordana for tolerating my ever-present box of book-related materials and work that has accompanied me everywhere over the past year.



# About the Author

**Mark Edberg, MA, PhD**, is Associate Professor in the Department of Prevention and Community Health at The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services, with secondary appointments in the Department of Anthropology and Elliott School of International Affairs. Dr. Edberg is an applied and academic anthropologist with almost 25 years of experience in social research, interventions, evaluation, strategic planning for agencies, and communication, primarily in public health, in both domestic and global contexts. Key areas of focus have been: high-risk and marginalized populations, social determinants of health, health disparities, minority health, at-risk youth, prevention of youth violence, prevention of HIV/AIDS and STIs, substance abuse, general issues of poverty and health, and theory development. He currently directs a health disparities research center funded by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD), and has directed research and interventions funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIH), U.S. Office of Minority Health, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF), and other DHHS agencies. He has been working globally with UNICEF in the Latin America-Caribbean region and with UNICEF-Belize, as Director of the Center on Social Well-Being in the Latin America-Caribbean Region. He has also provided consulting and support for the Organization of American States, USAID, Urban Institute, and local governments, and he maintains an ongoing collaboration with DSG, Inc., a consulting organization, for qualitative research and evaluation efforts. Dr. Edberg teaches both graduate and undergraduate courses in social/behavioral theory, qualitative research, and the impact of culture on health, as well as courses in the Anthropology Department. He has published numerous journal articles, and his recent books include a book on culture, health, and diversity, this textbook on social and behavioral theory in public health, an accompanying reader, and a book documenting his U.S.-Mexico border research on narcocorridos and the narcotraficker persona (and implications for popular understanding of risks for violence, HIV/AIDS, and other issues). He is also a recipient of a Fulbright Senior Specialist award and a Fellow of the Society for Applied Anthropology.

