

Dr. David Hauser suggests finding and utilizing a metaphor that promotes a more nuanced view of cancer that also emphasizes prevention, may help counteract the negative effects of “battle” metaphors.

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Do our society’s “war” and “battle” metaphors for disease affect public health?

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Queen’s Psychology Assistant Professor **Dr. David Hauser** highlights the ways that our society’s “war” and “battle” metaphors for disease affect public health and stigmatize patients. “These are the most common metaphors used to discuss cancer and are a predominant way of talking about the disease overall, yet they promote the inference that cancer prevention is unimportant by putting the focus on treatment” says Dr. Hauser. “They have the power to shift people’s beliefs about the disease in subtle ways that could be harmful to public health.”

Additionally, Hauser suggests that these metaphors make unintended suggestions about patients. If they are in a “battle with cancer”, it places the onus of recovery on the patients themselves. And if they do not recover, it promotes the idea that the patient did not “fight” hard enough.

Hauser, along with Norbert Schwarz, a University of Southern California Provost Professor of Psychology and Marketing, recently designed a study to test the “war on cancer” metaphor. Participants were cancer-free, and presented with a story about a cancer patient that framed their diagnosis as either a “journey with the disease” or as a “battle against the disease.” The research team wondered if aggressive language might prompt participants to think more about cancer detection and prevention strategies.

Instead results showed that participants who read the “battle” version of the story perceived cancer as being more difficult and painful to treat and also felt that cancer was less able to be controlled or prevented. Hauser speculates that this sense of resignation to cancer might lead

people to ignore healthier lifestyle choices that could reduce cancer risks. For instance, those who believe that they have no control over whether they get cancer tend to enact fewer cancer prevention behaviours, and battle metaphors for cancer increase these beliefs.

However, Hauser suggests that metaphors may also be the answer. Finding and utilizing a metaphor that promotes a more nuanced view of the disease that also emphasizes prevention may help counteract the negative effects of battle metaphors. His current projects are exploring this.

In the Department of Psychology at Queen's University, Dr. Hauser studies judgment and social cognition. He is particularly interested in how communication guides our inferences, preferences, and reasoning. His work investigates how seemingly innocuous words color evaluations, how metaphors guide understanding of abstract concepts like disease and health, and how common survey methods shape research conclusions. He currently teaches undergraduate courses in Social Psychology and Judgement and Decision-Making and directs the research projects of several undergraduate and graduate Psychology students.

For more information on the “war-on-cancer” study, go to:

<https://news.usc.edu/161598/war-on-cancer-usc-sunita-puri-palliative-care/>