

Study shows testimonials can open acceptance to differing opinions on controversial topics

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It's hard to change people's minds, especially on a topic they feel strongly about. But a new study from the University of Kansas shows

that testimonials about a person's lived experience can open people to acceptance of attitudes different than their own on controversial topics. That could go a long way in helping communicators reach people on important topics regarding health, life, death and other difficult to discuss issues, researchers say.

A study surveyed nearly 1,500 people on their attitudes about several controversial issues, including if they were in favor of or opposed to physician-assisted suicide. When they then read a testimonial that gave a moving account of a person's lived experience with the issue, they were more likely to be receptive to an attitude different than their own than those who read an informative article on the same topic.

"At their core, testimonials are essentially the story of someone's lived experience. They can be evocative or emotional. But much of the research on narratives tends to focus on much bigger productions like movies, television or books rather than how testimonials or simpler forms of stories affect people, but not on how effective they can be in [everyday life](#)," said Judy Watts, assistant professor of journalism & [mass communications](#) at KU and lead author of the study.

"Physician-assisted suicide is a very polarizing issue that can elicit complex and mixed emotions. It hit all the areas we are interested in with researching communication processes and persuasion about issues that involve life and death."

Participants in the study were randomly assigned either a testimonial or an informative article on the topic, so some received a testimonial or article that aligned with their previous beliefs, while others did not. They then answered another set of questions about how they felt on the topic afterward. Those who read testimonials on [physician-assisted suicide](#), whether pro or con, were the most willing to accept or consider the value of opposing views.

"Regardless of baseline attitudes, they were a little more willing to accept the persuasive argument of the testimonial, even when it differed from their own," Watts said.

Written with co-authors Michael Slater and Emily Moyer-Gusé of Ohio State University, the study was published in the journal [Communication Research](#).

The findings can help communicators craft messages that are more likely to effectively reach their target audiences, especially if it involves a controversial or sensitive topic, the researchers wrote. During the COVID-19 pandemic, testimonials were used frequently to encourage people to take the vaccine, encourage their [family members](#) to do so and to take other protective measures. Those came at a time when there was much public debate about the vaccines, masking, business and school closures and other measures that elicited strong reactions.

While movies and larger productions have long known the influence of an engaging story on audiences, many communicators do not have the budgets or other resources to craft such an elaborate message.

The findings also show that testimonials can be effective in eudaimonic situations, or when people are striving to do what is meaningful, even if it is difficult to achieve. In a media-saturated environment it is difficult to produce messages that reach people, and better understanding the effectiveness of certain types of communications can help, especially those with limited budgets and means, reach their target audiences, researchers said.

Watts, who conducts [research](#) on the [influence of media on individuals' emotional responses](#), said she hopes to continue studying the effects of testimonials on other topics, including those that might not be as controversial but are still emotionally fraught, such as end-of-life

conversations about whether to resuscitate and end-of-life wishes.

"A thoughtful and emotional testimonial can help reach people. We'll continue to study what happens when people encounter testimonials on topics that might not be easy to discuss but are nonetheless important for health-related decision making and behaviors," Watts said.

More information: Judy Watts et al, Affective Responses to Counter-Attitudinal Testimonials Drive Persuasive Effects: The Case of Physician-Assisted Suicide, *Communication Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00936502231198551](https://doi.org/10.1177/00936502231198551)

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