



## **Touching Hearts, Touching Minds:**

### **Using Emotion-Based Messages to Promote Healthy Behaviors**

#### **FY 2003 USDA Special Projects Grant Massachusetts WIC Nutrition Program**

The aim of the Touching Hearts, Touching Minds initiative was to increase the Massachusetts WIC Program's ability to provide nutrition education services that influence WIC families to incorporate healthy dietary, parenting and physical activity behaviors into their daily lives. Advertising and marketing research has demonstrated that people make behavior changes in response to messages that contain emotion. Emotions drive behaviors, making them central to the behavior change process. The Massachusetts WIC Nutrition Program used this principle in transforming their traditional nutrition education approach, which relied heavily on logic and fact, to a technique that connects to emotion. The new emotion-based education materials and counseling techniques combine relevant, emotional motivators with current nutrition science to help WIC staff better connect with WIC families and promote the adoption of healthy behaviors.

This project pulled expertise from multiple disciplines including nutrition, advertising, marketing and education to accomplish the following four outcomes:

1. Identification of the emotional "pulse points" of Massachusetts WIC mothers, related to eating, parenting and physical activity. "Pulse points" are fundamental emotional impulses (or hot buttons) that when triggered result in an action or reaction. Connecting with pulse points can strongly contribute to positive behavior change. Prevalent "pulse points" motivating Massachusetts WIC mothers included security, pride, happiness, success, and hope for the future.
2. Development of 30 specific messages and materials that combine these emotional "pulse points" with current factual nutrition information-- in attention-grabbing graphic design--for use in nutrition counseling and education. The messages and materials were tested in 6 local WIC clinics with great success.





3. Enhancement of WIC staff's ability to effectively incorporate these materials into nutrition counseling and education and use emotion to impact behavior change. Staff received skill development training on providing emotion-based, participant-centered individual counseling interactions. In addition, staff received training on facilitating group discussions which provide opportunities for WIC participants to share nutrition concerns in a supportive environment and allow mothers to learn from other mothers.
4. Creation of the user-friendly website [www.touchingheartstouchingminds.com](http://www.touchingheartstouchingminds.com) which includes an overview of emotion-based services, guidance for implementing emotion-based services in individual counseling and facilitated group discussions, training tools and videos, and printable versions of each material. This website has maximized the transferability of the Touching Hearts, Touching Minds initiative and emotion-based nutrition services to other health professionals throughout the country.

The following handout is an excerpt from the staff training manual for *Touching Hearts, Touching Minds: Using Emotion-based Messages to Promote Healthy Behaviors*. It outlines tips on facilitating “Amazing conversations.” Staff can use this emotion-based counseling technique to facilitate meaningful discussions with WIC participants so they can become more effective in changing their behavior.



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*Tips to Try*





## Facilitating *Amazing* Conversations!

The purpose of *Touching Hearts, Touching Minds* is to reframe nutrition education materials and approaches to focus on benefits (why it is important) rather than the facts (things that define it). Until participants understand the emotional (“real”) benefits of doing something facts are irrelevant. To be most effective using the emotion-based approach or materials, WIC staff should strive to create an emotional bond with the participants they interact with. Establishing an emotional bond goes far beyond words like “we care.” It means providing services that allow participants to feel:

- The WIC clinic is a safe, secure and comfortable place for them and their family
- WIC staff respect and honor them as individuals
- WIC staff genuinely care about them and their children
- WIC staff think of them as intelligent people capable of making decisions about their children

One way staff can establish this type of relationship with participants is by facilitating “*Amazing Conversations*”!

### ***Amazing Conversations!***

Have you ever had an *amazing* conversation? An *amazing* conversation is one that you think about for days, weeks—or a lifetime. It usually contains a few “aha! moments” and is almost always emotional. The end result may be great insights, new wisdom or changed actions. But it is always an honest and respectful exchange between supportive people in a trusting situation.

*Amazing* conversations are different than traditional lecture-style group discussions. Lecture-style discussions have a place outside of WIC. There are times when an exchange of views on the same topic is just right. But after the exchange, how often do people change their mindsets and actions? People usually hold fixed positions, argue in favor of their views or try to convince others to change. *Amazing* conversations have the power to engage, provoke, evoke and evolve people into action!

WIC is a behavior change program. Simply exchanging views on the same topic won’t change the WIC world, get participants excited about coming to WIC or make your job more satisfying. Instead, we need *amazing* conversations that allow WIC staff and participants to seek understanding and insights from each other. The goal is to create new understandings that are aimed at action.

**But that’s not all! Turn this page over to learn more about *amazing* conversations.**

## What are the key differences between traditional lecture-style discussions and *amazing* conversations?

The key differences between traditional lecture-style discussions and *amazing* conversations are few, yet profound:

**Social bond:** There is a social bond between conversation participants. That doesn't mean that they're always best friends, but all participants feel they are liked, accepted, respected and valued. *Amazing* conversations won't happen if WIC staff maintain a professional distance or communicate they are different from participants.

**Not exploitive:** People engaged in *amazing* conversations don't try to exploit or manipulate. They listen fully, respect each other and trust the process. People are likely to listen, consider and even adopt the perspectives of others if they feel others listened and understood them.

**Belief that everyone is equal:** There are no power positions. To facilitate *amazing* conversations, WIC facilitators must acknowledge that their opinions are no more important for the group to hear than the opinions of others. They may respectfully present them for the consideration of others as well as provide insights on why they hold those opinions, but must not prescribe or dictate them as the "right" way.

**Spontaneous:** *Amazing* conversations happen when participants pick topics relevant to *their* lives. The facilitator can guide the discussion within the agreed framework. Fortunately for WIC staff, participants love to talk about their children and how they can best impact their lives in positive ways.

**Accepting:** People instinctively know when they are being judged. Body language, words or attitudes betray hearts despite our best efforts to hide judgmental thoughts and feelings. To have *amazing* conversations, we all need to examine our hearts, challenge our perceptions of superiority and erase them.

**Human truths sought:** We are all struggling to identify and apply human truths so that we can live our lives fully. Conversations that get below the surface to examine the real issues of life are likely to be *amazing* while those that linger at the surface are quickly forgotten and discarded.

**Trust and confidence:** Conversations that are truthful and real only happen when people feel confident that what they share will be respected and honored. That means criticism, snide remarks, rolled eyes, judgmental glances and shocked expressions must be eliminated to protect all participants. Facilitators lead by example.

**Atmosphere of listening:** The most basic human need is the need to be understood. Listening is a gift.

