

Talking about Health, Place, and Policy - Tree Exercise

This exercise provides a useful framework to discuss how health outcomes are a product of social determinants.

Directions:

1. Draw a bare tree with roots, a trunk, and branches.
2. Ask participants to list several disease outcomes prevalent in their community. These may include asthma, diabetes, obesity, injury, heart attacks, and depression. List these diseases as the leaves on the tree.
3. Next, ask people to list behaviors that contribute to the disease outcomes they identified. These may include overeating, lack of physical activity, and substance abuse. List these on the trunk of the tree.
4. Finally, ask people to list social, economic, and political determinants that influence the behaviors they described. These may include poverty, racism, unaffordable housing, lack of public transportation and grocery stores, and air pollution. List these determinants at the roots of the tree.
5. These determinants represent the “root causes of disease.” Describe how some of the root causes impact health outcomes through behaviors (e.g., lack of a grocery store impacts diet and therefore diabetes) and others impact health outcomes directly (e.g., air pollution leads to respiratory disease).

Very often, people begin by listing either behaviors or root causes when initially asked about disease outcomes. The facilitator must write these things in the correct part of the tree to clearly illustrate antecedents to poor health. At the end, state that HIA can be described as a process to assess how a project or plan impacts the roots of the tree, and through those determinants, the disease outcomes listed on the branches. See below for a sample tree.

