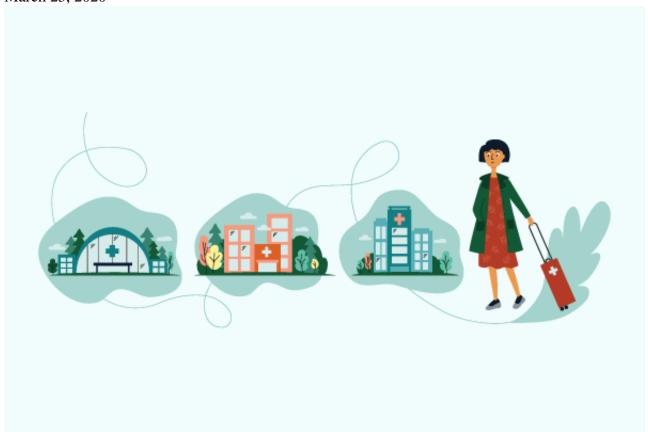
## Want Healthier Americans? Shift the Focus from "Personal Choice"

March 25, 2020



Popular narratives centering on "free choice" and "personal responsibility" might contribute to <u>high</u> rates of ill health and poor well-being in the <u>United States</u>, suggests a recent article in <u>Perspectives on Psychological Science</u>. The authors, Cayce J. Hook and APS Fellow **Hazel Rose Markus** (Stanford University), propose shifting to a narrative emphasizing that: (a) health depends on the individual and the environment, (b) health has impacts beyond the individual, (c) individuals can help cultures to support health, and (d) behavior-change policies can benefit health.

"A culture-wide emphasis on personalchoice and personal responsibility is harming Americans' health andwell-being," write Hook and Markus. Estimates by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that up to 40% of deaths in the United States caused by chronic "lifestyle" diseases—heart disease, cancer, chronic lower respiratory disease, diabetes, and stroke—could be prevented. Despite constant calls for people to take responsibility for their health, Americans die younger and experience more illnesses and injuries than their counterparts in other high-income countries.

"A culture-wide emphasis on personal choice and personal responsibility is harming Americans' health and well-being."

## Cayce J. hook and aps fellow hazel rose markus

Hook and Markus explain that healthmight not improve as long as messages such as "our physical and emotionalwell-being is dependent on measures that only we, ourselves, canaffect" and "personal responsibility is the key to good health" (USDepartment of Health and Human Services, 1991) pervade policymaking, media, andsocial norms. First, these messages ignore the role of social andenvironmental factors that are beyond personal control in shaping health. After all, a single individual can hardly affect pollution, public safety, inequality, affordability of healthy foods, and quality health care. Second, these messages promote stress and worry over health, can leadto blame and stigmatization of the unhealthy, and hinderthe adoption of policies that could make everyone healthier.

Narratives about freedom of choiceand fears of government control in health matters are perpetuated throughouta "culture cycle," the authors propose. According to this model,individuals are simultaneously products and producers of their cultures. In the United States, contemporary approaches to health are shaped by four levels of influence that interact with one another: (a) individuals and their attitudes, (b) interactions with others, (c) institutions (e.g., government, health organizations), and (d) the ideas of freedom of choice, personal responsibility, and individualism.

The emphasis this cycle places on theindividual, and the resulting resistance to governmentalinterference, also overlooks the role of environmental factors in supportinghealthy choices.

Everyday environments promotesedentary behaviors and unhealthy food choices. Moreover, "personal choice" hasbeen used to support a health care system that leaves the United States alone among rich capitalist nations in not guaranteeing basic universal healthcoverage" and has allowed food, tobacco, and alcohol industry groups toresist regulation that would limit sales, Hook and Markus explain.

Although it is undeniable that healthcan be influenced by individual choices, it is fundamental to understand thatphysical, social, and cultural environments shape these choices too, theresearchers continue. Other research indicates that an effective wayto improve health in the United States might be to "adopt policies that changeeveryday environments in ways that make healthy behaviors easy to do," writeHook and Markus. They call for broader narratives that improve theunderstanding that healthy choices do not depend solely on the individual anddo not exclusively affect the individual. "Individuals' health choices can haveprofound effects on their families, friends, and broader communities."

This broader narrative supports the idea that individuals can be social influencers who can help to change their communities and cultures for the better. It also supports the implementation of policies that make healthy choices more accessible than unhealthy choices. "Psychological science can play a major role in shifting narratives around health that are currently serving as barriers to change," Hook and Markus believe. "If appeals to choice and personal responsibility are making us sick, one path forward is to work toward creating more supportive environments that afford responsibility and make healthy choices available and easy to choose."

## Reference

Hook, C. J., & Rose Markus, H. R. (2020). Health in the United States: Are appeals to choice and

personal responsibility making Americans sick? <i>Perspectives on Psychological Science</i> . Advance online publication. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619896252">https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619896252</a>