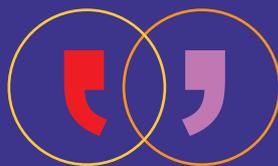


# How to Talk About **Cannabis** *A Checklist*

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[www.theworkshop.org.nz](http://www.theworkshop.org.nz)

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# About this checklist

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This checklist is designed to help you construct effective communication strategies, messages and narratives about cannabis law reform. It is based on a review of existing evidence and our own primary research.<sup>1</sup>

The goal of narratives for change are to surface people's helpful and deeper thinking about cannabis issues. Sometimes the narratives and language used by advocates inadvertently surfaces unhelpful and shallow thinking that may dominate the landscape. This checklist sets out how you can avoid surfacing this thinking and provides evidence-based alternative narratives and language to strengthen and surface people's helpful thinking.

## Overview of the checklist

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- **Step 1.** Map the landscape of thinking you are communicating into
  - **Step 2.** Understand the 5 building blocks of narratives for change
    - » **Building block 1.** Right audience with right story
    - » **Building block 2.** Lead with a vision for the better world
    - » **Building block 3.** Ground in effective intrinsic values
    - » **Building block 4.** Provide better explanations
    - » **Building block 5.** Use diverse storytellers
  - **Step 3.** Structure your communications as a story
  - **Step 4.** Check for common errors that can surface unhelpful thinking
  - **Step 5.** Check your images
  - **Step 6.** Test your narratives with the right audience

<sup>1</sup> This message checklist is based on:

- » A rapid review of framing evidence on cannabis reform
- » Narrative testing and research completed by The Workshop on justice reform in 2020
- » Our existing evidence-led building blocks of narratives for change

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## Step 1: Map the landscape of thinking and stories

The first step is to understand the unhelpful and helpful ways people currently think and talk about cannabis. Knowing this, you can choose messages that will avoid surfacing unhelpful thinking, and navigate people towards the helpful.

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### Unhelpful thinking to avoid in cannabis decriminalisation messages includes:

- Drug addiction is an issue of will power or self control and addicts/users need to try harder.
- Cannabis decriminalisation leads to significant individual consequences – apathy, loss of motivation, psychological problems, memory impairment, cognitive problems.
- Decriminalisation is a moral hazard (e.g. normalisation of drug use for young people, ‘gateway drug’, etc.).
- Decriminalisation will harm families/communities through family dysfunction, traffic injuries, public safety, workplace productivity, health costs.

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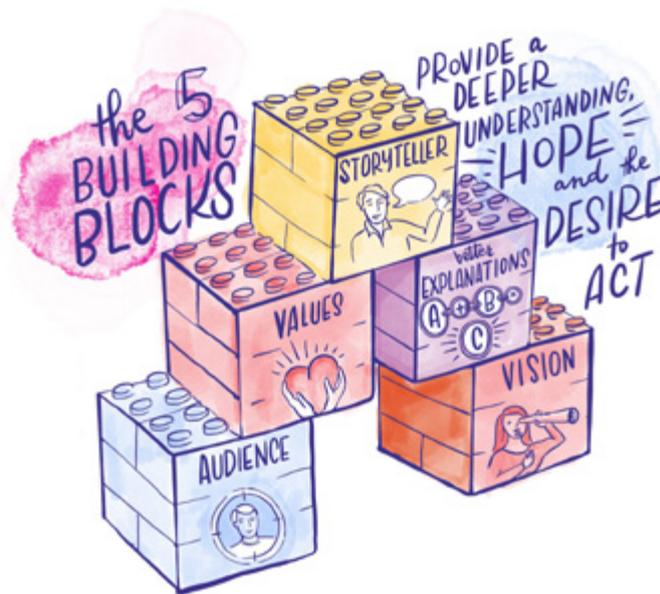
### The helpful thinking to navigate towards includes:

- Cannabis criminalisation is a social and health issue that affects all of our wellbeing.
- Legalisation is a crime prevention and an equity issue – it will reduce the number of young Māori being swept into the criminal justice system.
- Legalisation is a treatment issue – it will give people in the justice system scope and resources for treatment based approaches, reducing stigma and resource barriers.
- Legalisation is a community prevention issue – it will give community, iwi, health providers scope and resources for preventing young people from starting to use cannabis.



## Step 2: The five building blocks of narratives for change

Using these five building blocks of communication, you can avoid surfacing unhelpful thinking and instead surface more helpful thinking.



### Building block 1: Identify the right audience and tell YOUR story

Avoid	Replace
Constructing narratives just for supporters. You may not find narratives that surface helpful thinking.	Narratives tested on people who hold more ambivalent attitudes on cannabis decriminalisation. These people tend to move their views between supporter and opponent and their support is critical to tipping the balance.
Constructing narratives specifically to counter people who are opposed to your message, e.g. correcting false facts or negating unhelpful thinking. Doing this reinforces unhelpful thinking.	Constructing your story for the people most likely to be persuaded (using the tools and strategies set out below).
Individuals' stories that don't reveal the role of systems or people within a system. For example, avoid telling a story about a young person overcoming cannabis related harm after legalisation unless you also show the people and processes in the health, police and judicial systems that enabled that to happen. Or how their whānau were resourced to give them support they needed. Stories need to show how systems influence what is possible for individuals.	Stories that help lift people's gaze to systems like justice, economics, health, culture, and the role of people in those systems, like people in the health or justice system. For example, tell stories that show how people in government made choices that meant whānau had the resources they needed to support a young person to overcome cannabis related harm.

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## Building block 2: Lead with a vision for the better world.

Describe the better world that the people most affected by criminalisation want and need. Flip your problem (criminalisation causes harm) into an inclusive vision (how people's lives would be better with decriminalisation).



Avoid	Replace
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» A vision that is simply the removal of a harm (e.g. vision zero).</li><li>» Starting with a problem.</li><li>» Starting with the policy solutions/law change.</li><li>» An abstract vision that doesn't describe concrete impacts on people's lives.</li></ul>	<p>A vision that uses concrete language and is about people's lives being better, not better processes or policies.</p>



## Building block 3: Use helpful values to connect with your audience

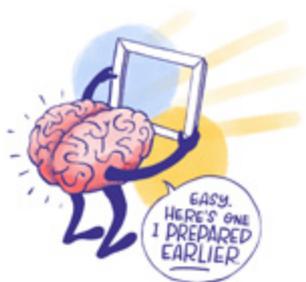
Values are things people aspire to most in life. Our values motivate us, influence how we receive information, and how we think about an issue like cannabis reform. People hold a wide range of values, but most of us aspire to helpful, intrinsic and collective values. Surfacing these values supports helpful thinking about collective issues in health, wellbeing, environment, justice and more.

Values to avoid	Replace with
<p><b>Safety and security</b> Focusing on safety surfaces unhelpful individualism thinking. <i>E.g. Drug law reform will keep the public safe by reducing drug driving.</i></p>	<p><b>Interdependence and interconnectedness</b> Focusing on our interdependence as citizens as the key to dealing with drug issues. This value surfaces thinking about cannabis being a social and wellbeing issue that affects all of us. <i>E.g. We are all connected and what affects one part of our community, like the harm caused by the current cannabis laws, affects us all. When we address people's wellbeing through health and wellbeing focused cannabis laws and policies, our whole country benefits.</i></p>
<p><b>Cost-effectiveness</b> Focusing on cost also surfaces unhelpful individualism thinking and doesn't surface thinking about drug law as a social or community issue. <i>E.g. Decriminalisation will save taxpayers and government money.</i></p>	<p><b>Pragmatism</b> Focusing on taking a common sense approach and using the tools we know will work to improve young people's lives. This helps build a sense of optimism that problems can be overcome, and in studies in related areas (e.g. justice reform) increased support for evidence-based solutions. <i>E.g. The government needs to identify and fund practical things, such as mental health services and drug treatment services.</i></p>
<p><b>Empathy</b> Focusing on the many individual harms to cannabis users that need to be addressed. While empathy might seem like a useful value, in practice it brings up unhelpful individualistic thinking like the idea that people should use willpower to quit drugs. <i>E.g. People who use cannabis are hurting themselves and others, we need to help them.</i></p>	<p><b>Care, helpfulness and responsibility</b> Focusing on good responsible care of people throughout the community, including people who use drugs. This helps increase support for policies and actions directed towards collective wellbeing. <i>E.g. Instead of punishing people, we should be doing everything we can to support them to live their lives fully. A responsible approach to drug law will improve the wellbeing of all our communities.</i></p>
<p><b>Tradition and conformity</b> Focusing on moderating and controlling young people's cannabis use for their own health and wellbeing. <i>E.g. Decriminalising cannabis will ensure we can measure and control the harm from cannabis use.</i>  This surfaces thinking that legalising cannabis will lead to a breakdown in society or problematic behaviour of young people (legalisation is a moral hazard). <i>E.g. Decriminalisation will normalise drug use for young people, or cannabis is a 'gateway drug'.</i></p>	<p><b>Self-direction</b> Focusing on allowing people to live their own lives and giving them the opportunity to support their wellbeing while doing so. <i>E.g. Changing our drugs laws is one way to make sure all our young people have the right opportunities to reach their goals in life and be active members of our communities.</i></p>

## Example of what the interconnectedness value looks like in a message:



*“As New Zealanders, we need to recognise that we are all connected and what affects one part of our community affects us all. When we address everyone’s wellbeing, our whole country benefits. One way to do this is to set up policies around cannabis use that make sure all parts of our population are strong and supported. Simply put, New Zealand would be better off if its citizens worked together to address the problems caused by criminalising cannabis use. Realising that we are interdependent is the key to moving forward and will allow us to deal effectively with our problems.”*



### Building block 4: Provide better explanations

#### Frames

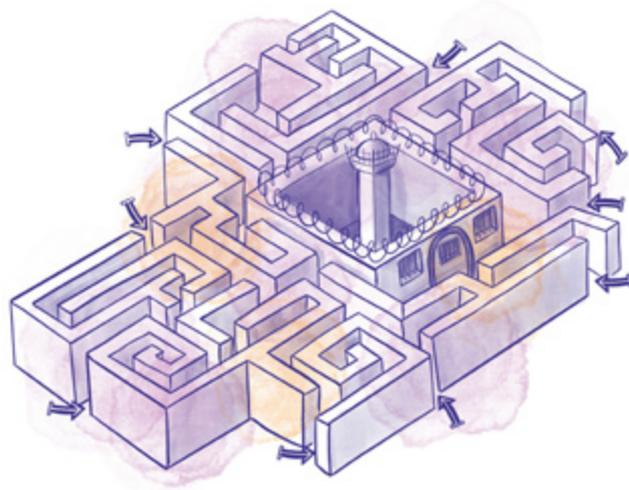
Frames are pre-existing, often unconscious stories people have about how the world works and why people do what they do. Some frames surface unhelpful thinking. Replace these with frames that surface helpful thinking more in line with best knowledge.

Frames to avoid	Frames to replace
<p><b>Individualism</b> Focus on individual choice, consumers or cannabis users. <i>E.g. It's about what we choose. It's about helping cannabis users make better decisions.</i></p>	<p><b>Public health frame</b> Health and wellbeing is founded in our communities, the places we work, play, live, and learn. Decriminalisation helps us promote and shape good health through better prevention and treatment.</p>
<p><b>Safety and control</b> This is about safe cannabis use.  This is about being able to control and monitor cannabis use and sales.</p>	<p><b>Interconnected wellbeing</b> The wellbeing of one person is connected to the wellbeing of all of us.  Ensuring young people are well means all of us do better.</p>
<p><b>Economics</b> The lost revenue from illegal cannabis could be put into the economy.</p>	<p><b>Common good</b> Decriminalising cannabis is about ensuring strong, vibrant communities.</p>
<p><b>Them and us</b> Young cannabis users and their families need help. Cannabis users are harming themselves.</p>	<p><b>Bigger than us</b> People from all cultures and backgrounds in Aotearoa New Zealand can come together and demand better for all our young people and, especially, our young Māori people.</p>
<p><b>Race neutral</b> People from communities all over New Zealand are hurt by criminalising cannabis.</p>	<p><b>Race and class together</b> No matter where we come from, what our culture, or background, we all want our young people in Aotearoa New Zealand to do well and be well.</p>

## Metaphors

Metaphors are a language tool that can provide better explanations and surface helpful thinking.

Metaphors to avoid	Metaphors to replace
<b>War/fights</b> We need to fight the real harm in our communities.	<b>Gears</b> We need more than one gear to manage cannabis harm, at the moment we only have criminal charges. Decriminalisation will give us more gears like prevention and treatment.
<b>Sports/team</b> We need to tackle this problem head on.	<b>Maze</b> Our cannabis laws put too many young people on a path that goes straight to prison and that has no way out. Like a maze without exits.

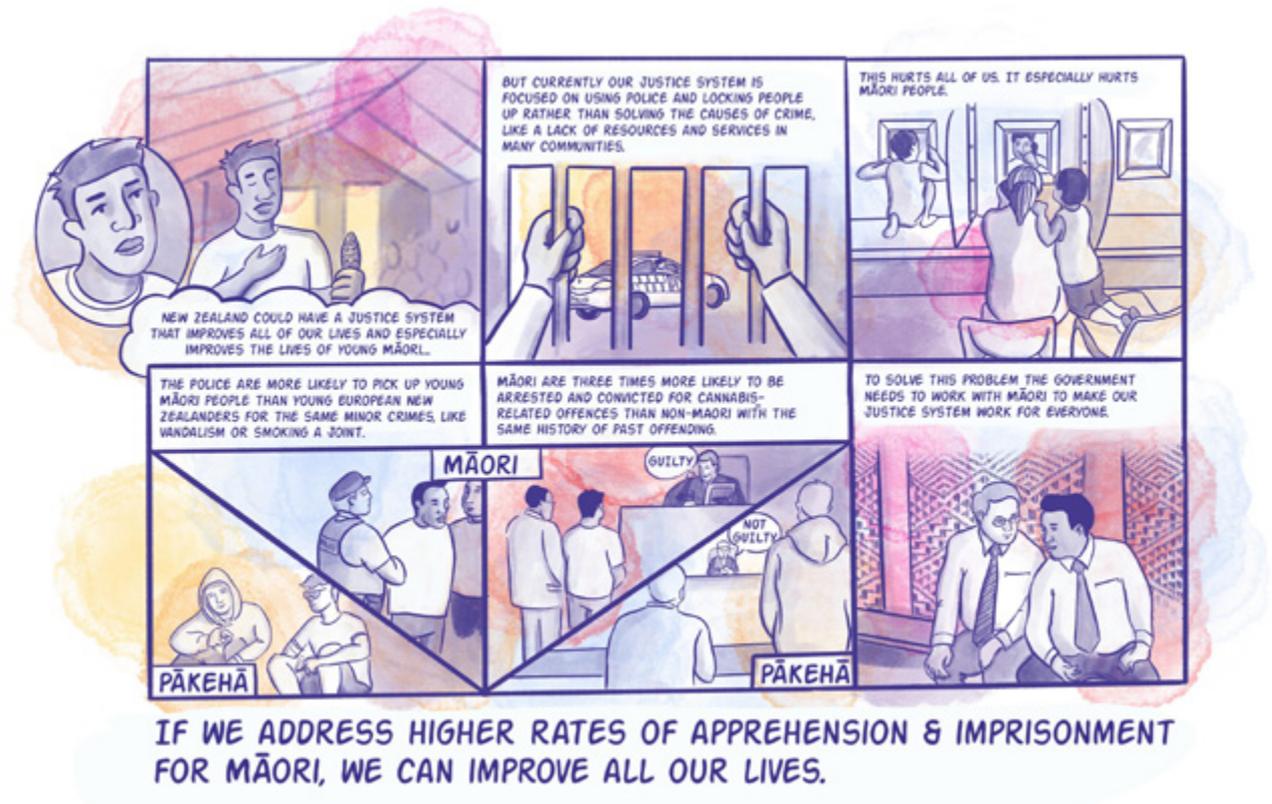


## Explanatory chains

Use an explanatory chain to explain cause and effects of the current cannabis laws. An explanatory chain has four main parts (setting the scene, facts about the cause, domino effects and solution) and uses facts carefully. These chains are especially useful when explaining the disproportionate harm that is done to Māori by our existing drug law.



## EXAMPLE: A chain of facts to explain racial inequity in cannabis law enforcement



### 1. Set the scene

No matter where we come from, what our culture, or background, we all want our young people in Aotearoa New Zealand to do well. We all want a common sense approach taken, and to do what works to prevent cannabis use and treat its effects in young people.

### 2. Cause (with facts)

Our current laws criminalise cannabis use. This means that young people, and especially our young Māori people are being swept into the criminal justice system. Police, juries and judges arrest and convict young Māori for cannabis-related activity at a rate that is three times higher than non-Māori. This is true even when other factors like having a previous police record are taken into account.

### 3. Dominio effects

Our cannabis laws could be focused on things that work, like prevention and treatment. Instead they put too many young people on a path straight to prison, where it is hard to find a way out. This harms all of us, but it especially harms young Māori people.

### 4. Solution

Together, we can decriminalise cannabis use and, instead, do what works to prevent and treat cannabis use in our young people. This is what will work to ensure all our communities thrive, together.

## Providing proof that change is possible

**There are several ways of thinking, or cognitive biases, which prevent people from acting to support change. These include:**

- Normalcy bias: People tend to think change is not possible, or even needed, and that the way our society is constructed now is how it will always be.
- Fatalism frame: People tend to think that people in government or in wider society will not act.
- Perception gap: People believe that others don't care about the things they care most about, even when most people share their aspirations.



**An effective strategy to overcome these biases is providing people with proof that others are prepared to act, and are already acting. This is called providing social proof.**

**You can provide social proof by:**

- Showing all the people who support change, often unexpected people (see messengers below).
- Ask people to tell others that they are supporting the change.
- Talk about how people from across backgrounds and cultures came together in the past to support change to achieve something New Zealanders value.
- Be sure to name the values that people came together to support.

**Examples of how you might do this in a message:**



*"At important times, New Zealanders have come together to reform laws and build the health of all our communities. Together, we demanded that people in the tobacco industry stopped advertising their products to children. We stopped people who don't smoke being exposed to tobacco smoke at their place of work. We can come together again to reform our cannabis laws and improve the health of our communities."*

*"New Zealanders from all backgrounds and cultures came together to support homosexual law reform and marriage equality. We did this because we knew that love is what matters, being able to love someone, be loved, and show it, no matter who you are."*

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## Building block 5. Use diverse storytellers

The messengers who convey messages about drug law reform also matter. Research on messengers and trust is complex, but findings suggest we should use:

- a wide range of messengers
- messengers who are well qualified to comment on the context of the message
- unexpected messengers who may align with persuadable people's values, e.g. former National MP Chester Burrows on justice reform
- intergenerational messengers, e.g. young people or children talking to their parents and grandparents.

Perceived expertise matters more than actual expertise.



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## Step 3: Build a story using vision, values, barriers and solutions

Put together your message by combining the elements outlined in this guide using this formula:

- **FIRST** > Describe your **vision** for a better world and why this matters (the **values**)
  - » Check: Are you using **helpful values**?
- **THEN** > Name the **barriers** and problems that are in the way
  - » Check: Are you using tested **metaphors**?
  - » Check: Have you selected and used facts that give better **explanations** about causes?
  - » Check: Have you **named the agents** responsible for removing these barriers?
- **FINALLY** > Present **solutions**. Include an action proportionate to the problem.

## Step 4. Check for common errors that surface unhelpful thinking

Avoid	Replace
Leading with facts, problems or policy solutions.	Lead with your vision of a better world.
Myth busting or negating someone else's story. Phrases like 'you may have heard' or 'it is NOT true that'.	Stay focused on telling your story as a more effective way to replace myth without amplifying them.
Using money, safety, or fear for self or fear of others as the 'why' to decriminalise. <i>Phrases like 'It will cost more in the long run if we don't' or 'To keep you and your community safe'.</i>	Using people, communities and all of us as the 'why' to decriminalise. <i>Phrases like 'Instead of punishing people who are already suffering, we should be doing everything we can to support them'.</i>
Phrases without people in them, e.g. <i>'The law needs to change' or 'Cannabis should be decriminalised'.</i>	Phrases that name people who can act, e.g. <i>'New Zealanders need to vote to change the law'.</i>
Phrases that make the wrong people responsible, e.g. <i>'Māori are disproportionately affected by cannabis criminalisation'.</i>	Phrases that name the people responsible, and their behaviours, e.g. <i>'People in the justice system punish young Māori disproportionality for cannabis related crimes'.</i>



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## Step 5: Check your images

The images we use to illustrate our messages can either reinforce or undermine the helpful values, metaphors and frames we have chosen. In particular, images often activate values or suggest metaphors.

### Ask these questions about any images you want to use:

- ➔ What are the values this image engages? Does this image evoke unhelpful values like safety and security or helpful values like interdependence and pragmatism?
- ➔ What frames does this image engage? E.g. Does the image engage an individualism frame by representing a person alone?
- ➔ What metaphors does this image engage? Common unhelpful metaphors include images of war or sports. A helpful metaphor shows the justice system as a maze.

Avoid	Replace
Negative or stereotyped imagery that does not match the values and solutions-led story you are telling. <i>E.g. young people smoking cannabis at a party, or a car crash.</i>	Positive imagery that reflects the values and solutions-led story you are telling. <i>E.g. families and young people doing well together.</i>

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## Step 6. Test your communications

**Testing tells you whether your message leads to the outcomes you are aiming for. There are two main ways to be sure that you are using a tested message:**

1. Use a message that has already been tested.
2. Test your message.

**Check:** Test with your persuadable audience, not the already convinced or the opposition.

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## Inspiration

**Here is an example of a communication strategy that reflects some of the recommendations in this message guide.**

**Video:** [Someone you love might need your yes](#)

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