

**USING STORIES  
TO  
GUIDE ACTION**

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A Guidebook of Stories  
of  
Ontario's  
Healthy Communities

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**DECEMBER 1994**

Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse  
*in collaboration with*  
Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition

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It is our hope that this guidebook provides encouragement and help for others who are beginning a healthy community process.

**Donna Mitchell, Ph.D.**

Writer/Editor for the Stories/Guide project

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## How to Use Stories as a Guide to Action

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There are many ways. Through stories we have the benefit of wisdom that can only be learned by experience. We do not always have time or means to look back and reflect on our own experiences, let alone the time to analyze the patterns and forces that helped and hindered us. Yet this is important information. Stories can provide us with guidelines to follow, can illustrate methods to try, and support our values and beliefs, by giving us an illustration of other individual and community experiences.

This guidebook on healthy communities uses stories as a way of looking back and examining community processes and activities. It is divided into five sections that take us through a structure similar to what is used in story-telling and in evaluation: a context, a description of experience, a reflection on what happened, an analytical framework and ways to take action.

Section I gives a context for the guidebook, exploring why stories and how the healthy communities stories were developed, shared and used in communities and associations. Would you see neighbourhood groups, teams at worksites or clubs, and school-community partnerships using these stories and developing their own stories?

Section II describes three components that make a community “crackle”. (*Description*)

Reflect upon your situation. What has already been done to:

- Raise awareness - of your issue, vision, activities...
- Build connections - with other groups, sectors, stakeholders...
- Take action - events, meetings, advocacy, workshops etc...

What has worked well? What area needs more emphasis? Some strategies are listed on pages 6 - 8.

What strategies would you try?

Section II also includes stories from nine communities. As you read the stories look for similarities and differences with your community. Reflect on their experiences and try to identify approaches that you feel might work in your situation. The names of contact people are available if you would like to reach them directly.

In section III, participants from the communities share their “words of wisdom”. (*Reflection*)

As part of your own learning, or as part of your group experience, it may prove helpful to ask participants to identify which comments feel particularly relevant for your situation. What do the “words of wisdom” say to your group? How can they be applied to help advance a change process within your community?

A framework for linking the components in the community is in Section IV. (*Analysis*)

As a group, draw your own process. What has been the pattern for your development? Do you feel your process has places where it stalls or gets stuck? What component(s) may need to be activated, worked on or laid to rest?

The final section suggests ways that you can tell your own story. (*Action*)

Who would you have tell your story? How can you begin this process? Identify some key questions to begin the story of your experience in building healthier communities. How will you share your story with others, so that other communities can learn from your experience and wisdom?

## Section I

### COMMUNITIES LEARN FROM STORIES

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Like thousands of others, I have found John McKnight to be a source of both inspiration and wisdom when it comes to thinking about community. John has been particularly interested in what differentiates “institutions” (large, hierarchical organizations) from communities. Of the many distinctions he points to, one in particular has always stayed with me. “Institutions”, he says, “learn from studies; communities learn from stories”.

Unfortunately, our modern scientific worldview has too often led us to overlook that simple truth; if its not a scientific study with lots of data and statistical analysis, it can't be very useful and it certainly can't be true.

Yet if we stop to reflect, I suspect that many of us will have much stronger memories of the stories we have heard - whether as children or as adults - than of the studies we have read. Good stories - and good story tellers - involve us in an emotional way that leaves a lasting impression. Good politicians know that and tell us stories rather than put us to sleep with studies!

From the outset, the healthy communities movement has recognized that in describing the process of creating healthier communities, peoples' experiences and their stories were at least as important as any studies. Moreover, stories can be told immediately rather than waiting for the numbers to change, and stories are adaptable; people can hear a story and say “we could do that here - but this way”.

This is not to say that we do not need studies - they have their place. Communities can learn from good studies - ones they have set up to answer questions that are relevant to them and that are written up by them in plain language. But studies can't compete with the richness of good stories for, as Yvonne Lincoln noted in a speech to the First National Conference on Health Promotion Research in Toronto in 1991, citing T.S. Eliot (and an anonymous second author in the third line!):

*Where is the wisdom that is lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge that is lost in information?  
Where is the information that is lost in data?*

In the stories that follow, I hope you will find much wisdom and little data.

**- Trevor Hancock**

## **Why a Community Stories Guidebook?**

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*“Stories are what introduces us and connects us to one another. Our story is what draws us together,”* explains Bev Sawyer, the storyteller of the Woolwich story.

Storytelling is a traditional way of sharing knowledge, experience and history in a non-threatening and powerful way. Communities use stories to share their successes and obstacles they encountered as they struggle on common issues and concerns.

“Stories have always been an important part of the healthy community process,” says Alison Stirling of the Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse. When the Healthy Communities Network developed a proposal to the Ontario Ministry of Health to fund an organizing body, a second complementary proposal was sent to Health & Welfare Canada to help communities link into the healthy communities network and to share their experiences with one another. The latter proposal, called “Using Stories to Guide Action Project” was funded by Health Canada, Ontario Health Promotion & the Social Development Office and coordinated by Penny Theodore of the Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse.

The overall purpose of the “Using Stories to Guide Action” project is to help communities to become actively involved in a healthy community process. Development of stories at the community level encourages community participants to reflect on their experiences, and to share their information and tools within and outside their communities. Often a story is interpreted as a success story. It may focus only on what works, the good news. In this project, the purpose has been to hear the good, the not so good and the downright frustrating! Readers of the original versions of the stories seem genuinely glad to see some of their similar frustrations described and highlighted.

Finally, this project wraps up in this guidebook. The guidebook shares some of the stories and identifies common elements within the stories and in the communities’ experiences.

## **How Were the Stories Developed?**

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The original plan was for five regional correspondents to work around the province to accomplish three tasks:

- identify local/regional expertise, stories, experiences and resources,
- document experience and progress and make it available regionally and provincially for newsletters and this Guidebook.
- make the information/experience available to the local communities in the regions by using local newspapers, other media, fact sheets, consultation, focus testing groups and work shops.

These regional correspondents were to be located in different regions in the province, and paid on a fee for service basis equivalent to one day a week.

The interview guide for the stories (*see Appendix III*) was left purposely loose and general to allow the issues and priorities to surface naturally. However, the stories were to include:

- a description or profile of the community, including such things as population size, primary industry, location in the province, cultural breakdown....
- history of the Healthy Community process to date.
- a description of people and sectors involved, steps taken and issues that brought people together
- role of municipal government if applicable
- critical incidents, milestones, barriers and successes that the community had experienced.

It was expected that after the writing of the stories, they would be reviewed and validated by the community to ensure an accurate description of the experiences and perceptions.

#### Learning from Communities about Story-Writing

Between July, 1992 and September, 1992, the above expectations and criteria were presented at regional healthy communities forums organized by Ken Hoffman, (interim Healthy Communities provincial coordinator). These forums were held in Sudbury, Kingston, Sarnia, Toronto, Atikokan and Oakville.

Feedback from the Forum participants about the story collection was extremely positive. Participants were very excited by the possibility that they could learn from other community experiences in the form of community stories. However, the forum participants were less enthused by the plan for regional correspondents. Their concerns were that the regions were too vast and diverse; that the per diem rate couldn't adequately cover costs, especially for someone working in a large area; and that strong writing skills were needed. There was concern that "regional" correspondents might not be able to adequately reflect the subtle dynamics in the local community.

Hearing the concerns of the forum participants, the criteria for the regional correspondents was modified. Priority was placed on getting the stories written. Individuals with good writing skills would be hired. Also, local individuals could be approached to write the story for their own community.

Having heard from healthy communities groups about what worked for them, a decision was made to approach established projects and committees to allow them to determine who should

write their story. Once word of the project spread after the Regional Forums, many leads and story ideas surfaced from individuals from different parts of the province and members of the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition.

In some communities, members of a healthy community committee or a staff person wrote the story. In other cases, the committees met and suggested local journalists who could write the story. The journalist hired to write the Peterborough story was so impressed by the process she joined the Peterborough Healthy Community group.

### Sharing and Using the Stories

Members of the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition featured the stories in their publications. Stories were used by the Ontario Public Health Association, the Ontario Social Development Council and the Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse (OPC). In March of 1993, OPC published a whole issue of their newsletter devoted to stories collected through the "Using Stories to Guide Action Project". The Ontario Roundtable on the Environment & the Economy featured many of the stories in their community mapping project document. A collection of the community stories are distributed by the Ontario Healthy Communities Secretariat.

At the local level, communities found the stories useful in helping new members understand what had occurred, and for current members to remember the distance traveled, especially in realizing the accomplishments. The stories also provided a way for one community to communicate the experience to another community.

*"Our story is a source of information and a source of inspiration. We pass it around as a way for introducing new people - new joiners, or for anyone who wants to know about it. We also look at the story and say, 'Oh look how gung-ho we were at the time', or 'look at all we've accomplished'. It helps us realize how much we've learned."*

### For More Communities Stories . . . .

Through the project 17 English and 3 French stories were written. For a compilation of short and feature length versions of these stories, and new stories from more communities in action, contact:

The Ontario Healthy Communities Secretariat,  
#1202- 415 Yonge St. Toronto M5B 2E7, 1-800-766-3418 Fax 416-408-4843  
Internet: info@opc.on.ca

See Appendix I and II for more information on the Healthy Communities model and the Ontario Healthy Communities Network.

# HEALTHY COMMUNITY CRACKLE

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**PREP TIME:**

Several months to several years

**SERVES:**

All members of the community

**POTENTIAL YIELDS:**

Community spirit, enhanced personal health, economic development, more jobs, lower taxes, reduced overlap/duplication in service, economic sustainability, environmental stability, personally acceptable safe supportive community

**INGREDIENTS:**

A warm body from: (all ingredients can be substituted or others added as desired)

Town Planning Department	Town Council	Agricultural Groups
Housing Authority/Co-ops	Board of Health	Ministerial Associations
Chamber of Commerce	Legal Aid	Board of Education
Parks & Recreation	Service Clubs	Special Interest Groups
Environmental Groups	Small Businesses	Arts Councils
District Health Council	Hospital	Fire Departments
Private Corporations	Social Clubs	

**SPICES:** patience (use generously), respect, trust, understanding

**GARNISHES:** a slice of humour, slivers of fun

**METHOD:**

1. In a room, introduce equal parts of the main ingredients one at a time. Explore what the ingredients have in common, how they are different, and how they can compliment one another in the same recipe. Carefully explore the individual flavour of each ingredient for maximum taste potential.
2. Using determination, sift and resift ingredients to attain a consistency of common values and beliefs about their community and explore the potential for a palatable dish all can be happy with. Allow mixture to settle for a few days. Skim off scepticism before remixing.
3. Reintroduce main ingredients and work towards establishing a consistency that will establish a natural blend of community priorities. If the mixture gets sticky, on a large table, knead territorial boundaries gently, adding additional respect and understanding. Let the mixture mull for awhile until it is settled and ready for more kneading.
4. Spoon out natural clusters to create their own unique flavourful side dishes. This will enhance the main meal and make people come back for more!
5. Reduce mixture gradually to allow for the evaporation of too much of any one thing. The ideal consistency will be reached when a common vision is clear.

Ingredients can be mixed as often as you like. NEVER cover or boil. Simmer gently and slowly until all parts equally entice the senses and the end product(s) is something everyone can be proud of.