

# STARTING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FEAR APPEALS IN YOUTH SUBSTANCE MISUSE PREVENTION:

what are fear  
appeals, why don't  
they work, and  
what should we  
use instead?

## fear appeals

(strategy; ineffective) | see also: scare tactics

prevention strategies that are generally considered ineffective and rely on scaring a youth into avoiding a risk behavior.

e.g., mock car crashes, drunk driving simulators, drunk goggles

Source: adapted from [Prevention Tools: What Works, What Doesn't](#)

### Research shows strategies like mock car crashes...

- ↳ do not lead to positive behavior change;
- ↳ can increase risky behavior by modeling it;
- ↳ are least effective among those most susceptible to risky behavior;
- ↳ create psychological trauma; and
- ↳ may trigger stress by creating an environment that resembles a previous trauma.

Source: adapted from [Prevention Tools: What Works, What Doesn't](#)

While fear appeals sometimes lead to changes in perceptions or behavior, they are **far less effective** than strategies that model skills and solutions to limit risk behaviors. Fear appeals can **cause trauma and harm**, and often **do not lead to any positive changes.**

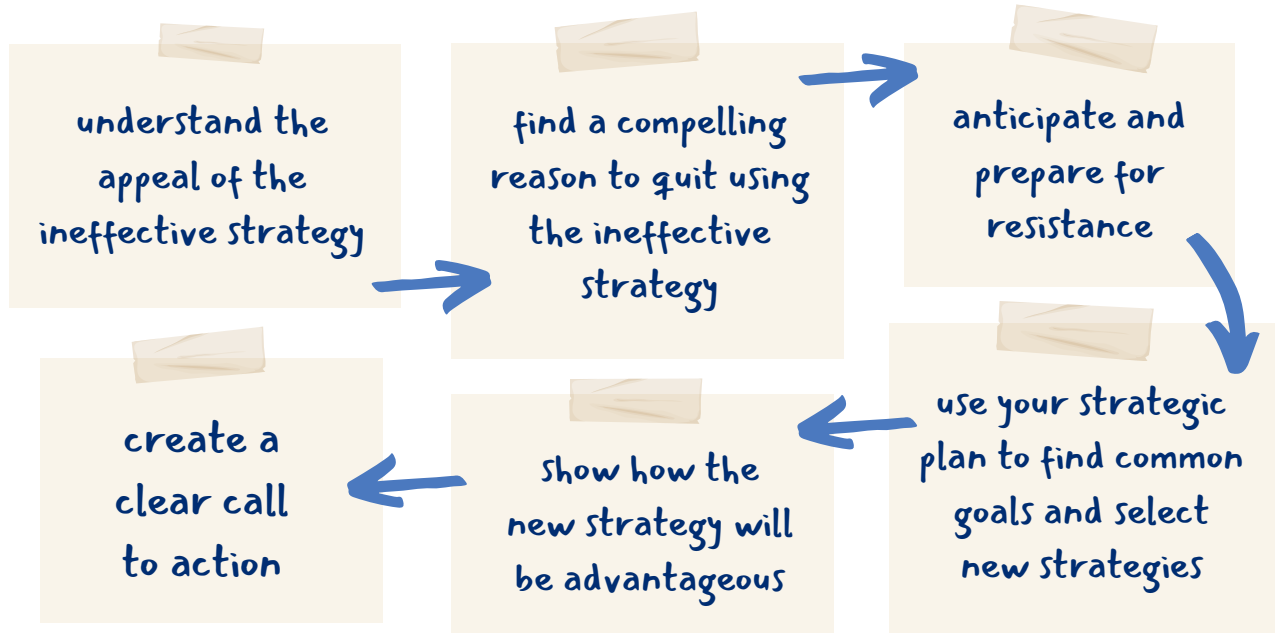
Source: adapted from [Prevention Tools: What Works, What Doesn't](#) and [Ruiter, Kessels, Peters, & Kok \(2014\)](#).

## Q: Why do many MN communities still use strategies like mock car crashes and drunk driving simulations?

**A:** Emotions are powerful, and youth often have strong reactions to fear appeals. While this doesn't prove their effectiveness, communities members who have seen these strategies in action over time may have strong opinions and powerful stories that inform their perspectives about how well fear appeals work. It is important to identify why members of **your community** are interested in a particular strategy before you work together to find a new one.

# How to start conversations about ineffective prevention strategies with communities/coalitions

Finding mutually agreeable strategies will require understanding and thoughtful communication.



Source: adapted from [What Does NOT Work in Prevention](#)

## More resources on this topic...

why fear appeals are ineffective

[Prevention Tools: What Works, What Doesn't \(2017\)](#)

Washington State Department of Social and Health Services

[Sixty years of fear appeal research: Current state of the evidence \(2014\)](#)

International Journal of Psychology

[Resource: Why Scare Tactics in Drug Prevention Messaging Don't Work \(2014\)](#)

Drug Free Action Alliance

how to transition to something else, and what to use instead

[What Does NOT Work in Prevention \(2023\)](#)

Prevention Technology Transfer Center

[Navigate and Embrace Change \(2023\)](#)

Simon Sinek

[Prevention Tools: What Works, What Doesn't \(2017\)](#)

Washington State Department of Social and Health Services

Looking for personalized assistance?



[Contact your RPC!](#)

hyperlink: [rpcmn.org/regions](https://rpcmn.org/regions)

# Detailed Resource Page

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- Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. (2017) Prevention Tools: What works, what doesn't. <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/22-1662.pdf>
- Ruiter, R., Kessels, L., Peters, G, & Kok, G. (2014). Sixty years of fear appeal research: Current state of the evidence, *International Journal of Psychology*, 49:2, 63-70. [DOI:10.1002/ijop.12042](https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12042)
- Drug Free Action Alliance. (2014). Why Scare Tactics in Drug Prevention Messaging Don't Work. <https://mnprc.org/2014/10/22/why-scare-tactics-in-drug-prevention-messaging-dont-work/>
- Prevention Technology Transfer Center. (2023). What does NOT work in prevention. <https://pttcnetwork.org/centers/great-lakes-pttc/what-does-not-work-prevention>
- Sinek, Simon. (2021, October 15). Navigate and Embrace Change. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUmTQ-86-YI&ab\\_channel=SimonSinek](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUmTQ-86-YI&ab_channel=SimonSinek)
- Contact your Regional Prevention Coordinator (RPC): <https://rpcmn.org/contact.php>