Participatory Action Research

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a national network of Prevention Research Centers (PRC) at universities that brings academic researchers, community members, and public health agencies together to collaborate on developing effective strategies to promote health, prevent diseases, and manage complications of illness and injury.
In participatory action research, researchers work hand in hand with communities from some of the most disadvantage communities who are active participants in the research of developing widespread use of effective prevention strategies. Researchers and communities partners look for ways to help entire groups of people make changes in themselves and their communities so that they can avoid the risk of chronic illnesses, such as heart disease, and disability from unhealthy practices.

These partnerships are based on mutual respect that builds trusting relationships. The benefits of these relationships include the community's understanding of and support for research, enhance the capacity for addressing health issues, increased likelihood of adopting and sustaining successful interventions, serve as a model for comparable communities in which research can be replicated and the community relationship often becomes one that other researchers and practitioners can build on for additional health issues. The community partner has many responsibilities that reflect local attitudes and beliefs. They must articulate the community values, contribute to research priorities, help recruit partner organizations, participate in delivering interventions and communicating results of the research to the rest of its members.

Basic Steps of Participatory Research

In taking each of the following steps, the researchers work hand in hand with communities and mutually agree on decisions.

1. **Assess the health needs and define the health problems**

   Conduct surveys and focus groups, analyze data, consult with community coalitions and advisory boards, and use other methods to identify a community's health needs.

2. **Gain a solid understanding of the problem and inform each other about the factors that must be addressed.**

3. **Decide on the most promising interventions.**

   Design new interventions or review the scientific literature for proven interventions likely to be successful when adapted to the community. Consider influences, such as acceptance by the community, feasibility of the activity, and the sensitivity to cultures norms.

4. **Pilot test the intervention.**

   Create and test educational materials, questionnaires, skill-building sessions, and other tools and techniques for delivering an intervention. Assess the intended audience's response and how reliable and valid the preliminary outcomes are.

5. **Deliver and test the intervention in a selected group.**

   Recruit a subset of people who represent the population and evaluate the effect of the intervention against results from a control group. Use methods to make sure bias in the result are minimal.

   If the intervention does not seem effective, the researchers may report the lessons learned and make changes for further testing.

   If the intervention is effective, the researchers move to the next step.

6. **Test the effectiveness of the intervention in a large population.**

   Carry out the intervention to determine how effective it is when put to the test in a large, true-to-life setting. Assess whether the intervention effect is reliable and valid and produces a meaningful public health impact.

   If the intervention is effective, the researchers move to the next step.

7. Conduct dissemination research

Explore questions related to the research intervention – for examples:

- Is it sustainable at least over 5 years?
- If not, what contributed to the loss of effect?
- What conditions influence whether the intervention is adopted for long term use?
- Can the intervention be replicated in a different environment and still be valid?

8. Communicate about the research.

Share information about the methods and the outcomes with researchers, practitioners, and the communities involved.

For more information, please contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Nation Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Mail Stop K-45, 4770 Buford Highway NE, Atlanta, GA 30341-3717; Phone (770) 488-5395 http://www.cdc.gov/prc