

***The following is an excerpted journal entry from my Personal Health course that explores social norms and how they relate to health behavior as well as the health education classroom.***

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### Week 3 Journal Entry

I was really taken by the Nicholas Christakis TED Talk this week, so much so that I watched the video twice! The notion that our emotions and behavior are affected not only by our closest social circle but even by the friends of our friends was new and amazing to me. I was especially interested in the idea of behavior choices spreading by induction. I know from my previous work in tobacco prevention that the perception of tobacco use as normal, and even the frequency of viewing tobacco products in stores, can have a significant impact on whether or not an individual uses tobacco. From the health teaching perspective, I think the influence of norms requires two things: first, where an unhealthy behavior is not as prevalent as it may be perceived to be (such as smoking rates, which kids of all ages consistently over-estimate), then it is important to provide students with the facts. More importantly, the somewhat shocking role “norming” can play in our health really brought home to me the need for students to develop skills in analyzing influences. This is something I do already but I think that I need to strengthen my units and also find ways to address influences successfully with my younger students. It would be fascinating to see Christakis undertake follow-up research on what might be done to counteract the effects of induction, homophily, and confounding in health behaviors!

A second key point for me this week, which linked the video to our textbook readings, was the notion of “emotional contagion.” I suspect this is exactly what is at play in the very negative class I have written about--where the tendency to cry easily and complain frequently seems to be spreading among the group. Given the link between happiness and good health that is set forth in the field of positive psychology, I think it is critical that I help my students cultivate more positive attitudes and behaviors. In this week’s e-book reading, I appreciated the section on “metamessages” in communication because it stressed that when we speak we actually say quite a bit through our facial expressions, body language, movement, and spatial behavior. I am actually working on listening skills with my third and fourth grade classes next week, so this reminder is very timely. Although I had planned to go over appropriate facial expressions for good listening, I would have probably skipped the other elements of nonverbal behavior if not for our reading. With this week’s studies on the importance of relationships and social connections, I am definitely inspired to go deeper into communication skills with my students. Nicholas Christakis noted that, “social networks are fundamentally related to goodness,” and I think that the more we can do to promote positive relationship skills in the classroom, the happier and healthier our students will be.