

Raising awareness of environmental illness through public display



Public displays can raise awareness of environmental illnesses, to the benefit of us all. We show several examples for inspiration.

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About the picture

The picture above is from an MCS Awareness Day display in Winnipeg, Canada, in 2015. It signifies the “bubble” people with MCS have to live in. Organized and photographed by Marie LeBlanc.

The plastic was so toxic they actually had to use a regular person to carry it.

Raising awareness

Most people have never heard about environmental illness. Those who have heard about it may have seen something in the media, which usually is negative and sensational.

Raising awareness is all about letting people know we exist and we are not the freaks the media likes to portray us as. You never know who you'll reach, and who may be helpful later on in some way where a little sympathy can make a big difference.

You may come in a situation where you have to explain yourself to a stranger. Then it is such a relief when the response is "I've heard about that" rather than the blank, uncomprehending stare.

It can also help dealing with your own family, friends, and workplace when they see you are not the only one in the world with these difficulties.

Since the illness is controversial, many doctors won't mention it when people come to them for help with their puzzling symptoms. An awareness display can help these people learn there is a name to their illness, that they are not the only ones, and that it is not so strange after all.

Since there is a stigma about these illnesses, many people choose to keep it a secret and suffer in silence. Seeing such a display can be a real morale booster to them.

Public displays

The idea with a public display is to put something in front of people. To make them curious. To get their attention for a little while and then let them go again.

The difficulty raising awareness is that the general population is not interested in getting educated about anything. They are much more interested in getting entertained. To reach the general population you have to do it in a way that is entertaining, with the educational part being less obvious.

Public displays are usually done outdoors, which makes it easier to dodge the toxic plume around most people.

Be creative

If you can, come up with a novel idea that can pique people's curiosity as they pass by your display. You want them to stop and pay attention.



Quotes from people with environmental illness projected on a building on Old Market Square in Winnipeg, Canada. Photo: Marie LeBlanc.

One activist used a digital projector to display quotes from people with environmental illness. They were projected on buildings, sidewalks, and other places in the evening.

Street fairs

A street fair is outdoors, where you can display things on a table. There are many formats, some just provide a spot to place your own table, while others provide both a table and a semi-enclosed booth.

The table will be a natural barrier that will give you a little more distance to people, but toxic drift will still reach you.

Work with the organizers to be placed in a safer location. You'd want to be away from any stalls selling food, soaps, candles or essential oils. Even if these things are okay for you, they may not be for people who might visit your display.

Have some sort of showpiece to grab people's attention. It can be a slogan, a picture, art or whatever.

Have flyers to hand to people (see later).

Art exhibits

Art can inspire people to think about an issue. It can be displayed in public spaces, art galleries, and museums. People in the art world tend to be more open to new ideas, and may be helpful providing spaces to show the art.



Art photography by Marie LeBlanc. It is a part of her “Overdressed” collection that features herself in a fancy dress.

Posters

Posters can be hung in a great many places, such as libraries, community centers, and doctors' offices.



Navajo indian poster protesting the stinky oil wells in their part of New Mexico. “Hozho” refers to living in harmony with the environment and society in their language.



Poster from the Australian asthma organization.

Parades

A parade can be an excellent way to reach a lot of people. The spectators will usually keep a respectful distance and you can slow down to keep away from the entry ahead of you. You could also ask the people behind you to stay back, if needed. (It could be a group of marchers wearing scented sunscreen or other chemicals).

You could contact the organizers to see if there are any floats that can be difficult to be near (such as diesel fumes, fireworks or amplified sounds). They may help put you in a safer section of the parade.



Shielded cabin on wheels, pulled in a parade in Gothenburg, Sweden, to protest the cell towers. Photo: Caroline Rabenius/FEB,

In some cities there are annual Disability Pride Parades, which is an obvious one to join. But many other parades could work as well.

You may want to check if the organizer's allow a "political" entry in their parade. If they allow any politicians, they should allow you too.

Street performance

A group of EHS activists in Sweden formed a small non-electric band and sang songs about the dangers of EMF at a few outdoor fairs. They wore somewhat odd costumes. One of them was dressed as a bride, which was actually shielded clothing that also covered most of her head.

Street theater can be a powerful way to get your message out. It has to be short, fun, and simple to understand. People will continue to join the audience so the message must be clear, even for people who missed the start.

The show should last five minutes, maybe ten. That is all people will stay for. Then repeat the show again and again.



Street theater protesting plans for an underground nuclear waste site.

The author happened upon the shown street theater while visiting the city of Aarhus in Denmark. The crew consisted of five people, of which only two or three actually spoke. The “drill tower” was just a few long sticks of wood that were easily disassembled and carried away.

The Faraday Cafe

An artist in Vancouver, Canada, operated The Faraday Cafe for a short time. He rented a storefront and shielded the walls and ceilings so cell phones got no reception inside. Then he ran an ordinary cafe there.

It was a creative way to make people think about their phone use, and enjoy a respite from their incessant chimes. It was never intended to be a business.

This setup would not work for people with electrical sensitivities, as the radiation level inside was probably not much lower. People were not asked to turn off their phones, as the gimmick was that people could see for themselves that their phones did not work. The phones would continue trying anyway. Also, some of today's phones have ways to talk wirelessly, even without a tower.

Interacting with spectators

A lot of people would want to say something to you, whether it is a simple “thank you” or they want to have a long talk. Some people will be very happy to finally meet someone like themselves.

There will also be people who refuse to accept the reality of the illness. Some may even want to argue with you. Understand that you can't change the mind of such people, but you'll still need to be courteous towards them. Always.

You may actually convince the spectators to such a discussion, even though they never say a word. On the other hand, if you lose your cool, spectators may think you are a loose cannon and discount everything you say.

You are an ambassador for all of us. People create stereotypes all the time, how you act can affect how people think about everyone with the disease.

It is best if you are at least two people. That you are not alone makes you more credible, and there is safety in numbers for the rare occasion someone actually gets upset.

Avoid shock effects

It can be tempting to prominently display shocking images of extreme cases of EI. Don't do it. It will grab people's attention but also label us as freaks.

When what people see is too far removed from normal life, they mentally avert their eyes. It's the same effect as when people walk past a homeless drunk on the street or they see something on TV about a famine in Africa. Most people keep their distance.

You don't have to hide these unfortunate realities, but make sure spectators don't get the impression that the extremes are the norm (the American media does that enough already).

Where to stand

It is best to do a display in an open place where people pass through but are not in a hurry. A subway station during rush hour is a poor choice, as it is too densely packed and people are in a hurry.

Much better locations are:

- Parades
- Pedestrian malls
- Farmer's markets
- Street fairs

Visitors to these places are seldomly rushed and they expect to see new and interesting things. There are many other possibilities.

Handouts

It can be helpful to have one or two people distribute handouts to the spectators. It must be only one page, with large lettering, so people can quickly glance at it. Anything more will deter many people from reading any of it.

Make the text simple and straightforward. Then at the bottom provide one or two internet links or social media tags for further information (must be short and easy to type).

Work on polishing the flyer over several days. It is an art to write clear and concise messages. You really have to debate each and every word.

Be aware that a lot of people may simply drop the flyer on the ground (depending on local culture). You should clean it up before you leave. Consider doing your display where public trash cans are available.

More information

Additional articles about environmental disability activist work on www.eiwellspring.org/activist.html.