

Building a Foundation for Health Equity: How to Learn and Unlearn Along the Journey

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About Healthcare Excellence Canada

Healthcare Excellence Canada (HEC) works with partners across the country to shape a future where everyone in Canada has safe and high-quality healthcare. We bring together people, evidence and action to move Care Forward - spreading and scaling quality and safety improvements, strengthening capacity and collective leadership and catalyzing change in policy and practice.

At HEC, healthcare excellence means improving safety, quality and value for everyone. It means care grounded in what matters most to patients, caregivers, communities and people in the workforce. It also means care that respects and responds to First Nations, Inuit and Métis priorities and is culturally safe, equitable and supported by the appropriate use of technology. Together with our partners, we embed these foundations across the health system.

Our work also focuses on expanding access to safe, connected, high-quality care closer to home and community. This includes supporting people with primary health care needs and older adults with health and social needs.

HEC is an independent, not-for-profit charity funded primarily by Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Health Canada.

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Healthcare Excellence Canada honours the traditional territories upon which our staff and partners live, work and play. We recognize that the stewardship of the original inhabitants of these territories provides for the standard of living that we enjoy today. [Learn more](#)



Acknowledgements

This resource was co-developed with the insight, experience and generosity of many people. We are grateful to the team members, collaborators, patient and community partners and leaders across health and social systems who contributed their time, wisdom and lived expertise.

The ideas and approaches reflected here do not exist in isolation. They are rooted in and shaped by decades of scholarship, activism and lived experience from

equity-focused practitioners, community organizers, researchers and Knowledge Keepers (past and present) whose work has long been naming and challenging the systems that create inequities in health and care. We are grateful to stand on that foundation and commit to continuing to learn from it.

A full list of contributors involved in the development of these resources is available on [HEC's website](#).



About this resource

The resource encourages teams to reflect on what they're learning throughout their health equity journey – not just at the end. Learning from the journey helps strengthen your capacity to make meaningful, equity-focused changes over time. The learning and unlearning required in health equity work is an ongoing process, requiring reflexivity and the ability to question taken-for-granted norms.

This resource is part of a series of implementation guides that support application of the co-developed [HEC Health Equity Framework](#) to advance equity across health systems and services.

How to use this resource

- Use this resource to guide regular check-ins, wrap-up sessions or evaluation planning.
- Invite team members and community partners to reflect together.
- Use the questions to inform future planning, adapt your approach and document lessons learned.
- Consider pairing this with a simple evaluation tool or storytelling method to capture impact.

Want to move ahead to implement the HEC Health Equity Framework?

The *How to Plan and Implement Priority Actions* resource can help you and your team tailor your efforts to community priorities, your organizational context, and the resources available.



Importance of learning from the journey

Health equity work invites us to reflect, learn by doing and strengthen our capacity to make meaningful change. It can also invite us to question what we thought we knew and to unlearn assumptions or practices that don't serve equity goals. This work can feel uncomfortable at times. As you plan your initiative using the [HEC Health Equity Framework](#), consider the following:

- How will you know if you are achieving your goals?
- How will you remain open to learning and unlearning as you engage in equity work?

Learning from the journey can happen in two important ways:

1. Regardless of your role, as an **individual** involved in health equity work, there is value in reflecting on what you have learned, what you can unlearn or relearn, and any emerging insights. This process can also help you identify questions that now feel important to explore.
2. As a **team** involved in health equity work, it is important to consider how the work has progressed over time. This consideration includes celebrating successes, examining opportunities for improvement, acknowledging challenges that arose and assessing whether the necessary supports were in place to respond effectively.

Things won't always be comfortable or go smoothly when you engage in equity work, particularly as you recognize that this work is also about understanding yourself and your own positions of power and privilege. Draw on what you are learning and consider new ways to move your work forward. Patience, understanding, compassion for yourself and others, unity and a desire for justice will help pave the way for success.



Worksheet: Questions to guide your individual and team-based learning process

For each question provided in Table 1, jot down your response and identify 1 or 2 opportunities to adjust to new ways of moving your work forward.

Table 1: Questions for learning and unlearning along the health equity journey

Questions	Response	Opportunities for Adjusting
How has your understanding of health equity concepts changed throughout the journey?		
Have your health equity-related commitments evolved? If so, in what ways and why?		

Questions	Response	Opportunities for Adjusting
Have you developed new (or different) accountabilities with other people, communities and team members along the way?		
Did the priority actions for your organization or network change? If so, in what ways?		
Has your sphere of influence changed? If so, how? (A sphere of influence refers to the kinds of impact you can have on people and the world around you.)		

After reflecting individually and as a team, consider the following questions in Table 2:

Table 2: Questions for carrying learning forward

Questions	Response
How can you share this learning with others in your organization and community?	
How can your lessons learned inform future work?	
What insights emerged that you didn't expect?	
What do you need to let go of or do differently?	
How will you regularly revisit your learning and the guiding commitments in your health equity work?	

Next step

Learning is only as powerful as what you do with it. Take a moment to answer the following questions:

How will you apply what you learned in your organization, team or work?

How will your learning shape the way you show up in relationships with colleagues, partners, patients and communities?

What has this journey taught you about yourself, your own position and your ongoing growth in health equity work?

Resources to support learning



[**The Commons: Social Change Library**](#). The Learning Zone Model by Maxwell J. Smith demonstrates how to learn and unlearn successfully.



[**National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health**](#). This resource offers practical insights from two organizations that implemented health equity frameworks, offering lessons to guide equity-focused action and practice.



[**Institute for Healthcare Improvement**](#). This summary of key lessons from health system teams that implemented equity-focused interventions highlights practical insights and strategies for advancing health equity.