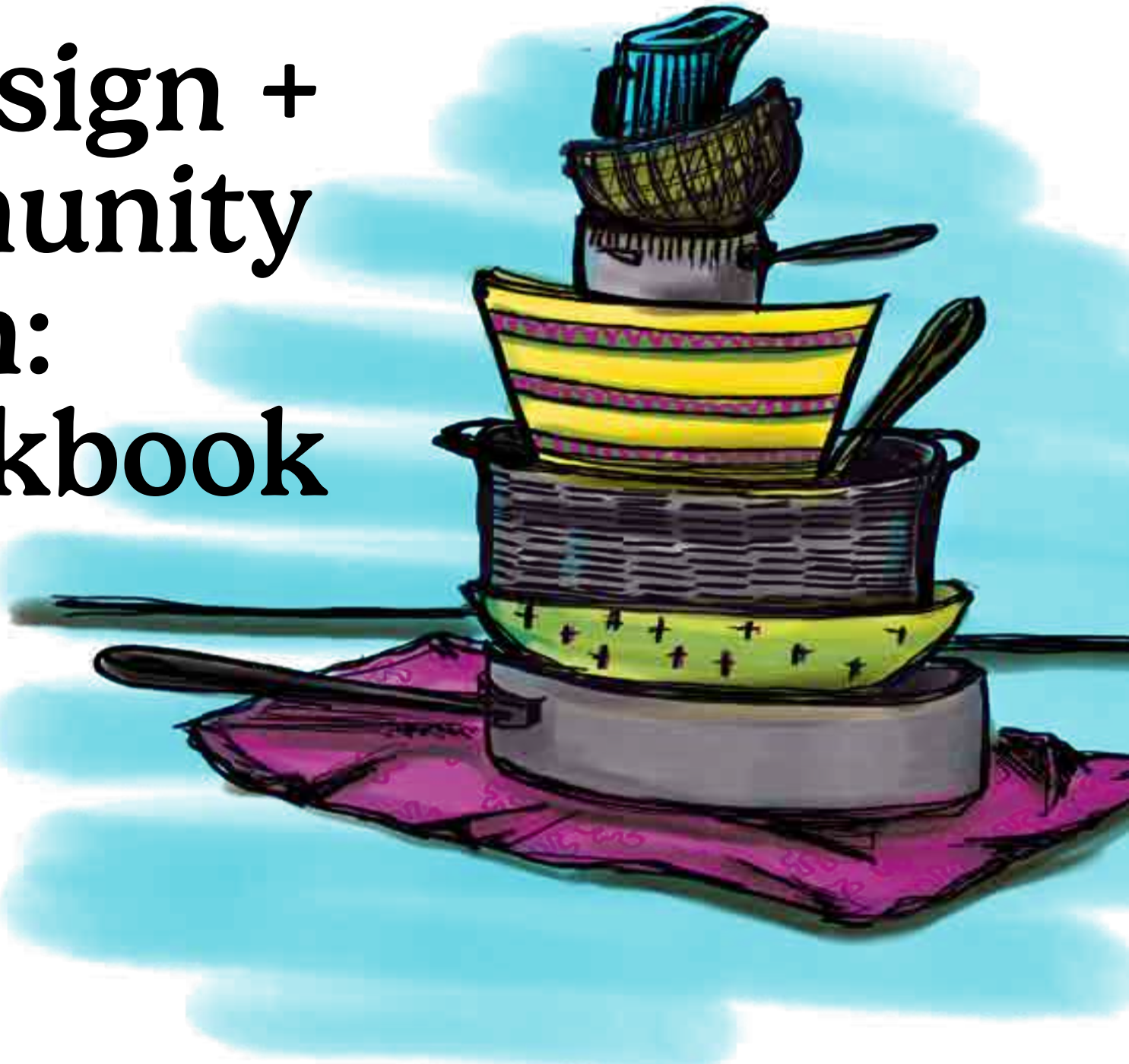
Co-Design + Community Health: A Cookbook



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Let’s get cookin’

Hi community health folks—facing a messy, complex public health challenge? Tired of the same old focus groups and surveys? We’ve cooked up fresh ideas and practical co-design tools to help you whip up programs, policies, and services with the people you serve.

The Recipe

What strategic foundations will guide your process?

Kitchen Vibe

What is the atmosphere and values that shape how people feel in the room?

Time to Cook

What tools, techniques, and facilitation practices will bring new ideas to life?

The Meal & Beyond

How will the work move forward after the table is cleared?

Introduction

Given how complex community health challenges are, we need collaborative approaches that help people make sense of problems and integrate diverse perspectives. This means pulling from research, direct experience, shared stories, what we find when we test ideas together, and what comes out of relationships. In that spirit, we are sharing ideas for co-design, an approach that can help public health folks use creative, inclusive activities to generate new solutions, test them out, and refine them.

Co-design invites all forms of knowledge to the table, valuing both what is already known and what can only be discovered together. At its core, co-design is a collaborative approach to creating solutions, services, and systems in partnership with the people most affected by them. It's about shared power, creativity, and care - not only about what we do, but how and why we do it.

We shaped this handbook like a cookbook because, in our eyes, co-design has a lot in common with cooking. It's not about following an exact recipe but learning how to combine ingredients, test flavors, and feed the people at your table. There may be guidance and technique, but there's also room for adaptation.

Whether you're planning a full-day workshop, an ongoing collaboration, or a single collaborative session to identify solu-

tions to public health problems, this handbook can serve as a roadmap and a reminder. It shows us how thoughtful design begins with intentionality, and that transformation happens when we bring our whole selves into the work and invite others to do the same.

And as we do this work, we cannot overstate the value of centering joy and authenticity—because the most meaningful solutions emerge not only from analysis and structure, but also from genuine connection, trust, shared laughter, and the freedom to be real (and at times vulnerable) with one another.

If this feels entirely new, don't panic. Many of the principles of co-design overlap with how we live, collaborate, and make decisions in community: listening deeply, weighing different perspectives, building trust, and moving forward together. You may be practicing co-design without using that name. The truth is, this expertise is already in you. At the same time, co-design may ask you to slow down, to sit with discomfort, to trust others more fully, or to share control in ways that feel unfamiliar. Like any skill, these capacities grow with practice, reflection, and intention—and a healthy dose of joy.

Illustrations by Lauren Haule

What is co-design?

Co-design is like cooking from a shared recipe. Hand the same recipe and ingredients to ten people and you'll end up with ten different dishes. Some will add a personal twist; others will adapt based on what's in the pantry or who's coming to dinner. The same dish can taste really different depending on the spices used, the tools on hand, or the cook's sense of balance and flavor.

That's the nature of co-design: not a rigid formula, but a set of guiding techniques to help teams understand public health problems and create, test, and refine innovative solutions. The process provides structure without demanding uniformity and encourages creativity, responsiveness, and iteration—essential qualities when working with diverse communities and complex challenges. Your particular "flavor" might be shaped by community norms, the urgency of the issue, or the relationships in the room.

Co-design prompts us to alternate between thinking big and focusing in. First, you gather ideas—many ingredients, diverse inputs—without judgment. Then, through testing and iteration, you refine those ideas into something concrete. This supports a culture where people feel encouraged to explore freely before narrowing in on a shared direction.

Co-design is not a method; it's a mindset. It builds on what is already known, say from researchers from the Department of

Public Health, and asks: What can the research tell us? And what might we miss if we stop there? It creates space for discovery that research evidence alone may not uncover, especially when working with underserved communities. Unlike traditional models where professionals (and often outsiders) design for communities, co-design invites communities into the process as equal partners. It honors lived experience and values multiple forms of knowledge—emotional, cultural, experiential, and academic.

It requires humility, curiosity, and a willingness to share control. It's not about getting everyone to agree all the time, but more about identifying tensions, clarifying values, and co-creating something meaningful.

So, what makes co-design work? Trust, time, and transparency. Strong facilitation supports the process, creating space for all voices and managing group dynamics with care. Play is another key ingredient. Far from frivolous, play invites experimentation, lowers the stakes of failure, and opens up new ways of thinking. Through prototyping, improvisation, and even humor, co-design helps groups break out of rigid patterns and move toward new possibilities.

Co-design isn't always easy. It takes longer than top-down planning. It can bring up discomfort and requires letting go of the idea that the facilitator or organization always knows best. But what it offers in return is deeper connection, more relevant solutions, and a community that feels invested in the outcome.

This handbook offers one such recipe. Follow it as closely or loosely as you need. Taste often. Adjust seasoning. And remember: the goal isn't to replicate someone else's meal—it's to nourish the people at your table.

The following sections take you through the four parts of the co-design experience, structured around the metaphor of a shared meal:

The Recipe
The foundations that guide your process.

The Kitchen Vibe
The atmosphere and values that shape how people feel in the room.

Time to Cook
The tools, techniques, and facilitation practices that bring new ideas to life.

The Meal & Beyond
How the work moves forward after the table is cleared.

The Recipe

Strategy and Foundations

Every co-design process begins with a deep understanding of your "why." Before you invite people to the table or plan the session, it's essential to ask: What are we here to create? Who will this serve? Who needs to be in the kitchen with us to shape it?

Just as a good recipe depends on knowing your ingredients, strong co-design depends on intentional preparation.

Thinking about the process:

Co-design requires transparency: What decisions are being made? Who's weighing in? How will feedback be used? Clarifying roles and expectations early on helps participants feel respected, engaged, and ready to contribute fully.

Thinking about what you are drawing from:

In co-design, research evidence—academic studies, evaluation data, published findings—can offer a solid base. But that's just the beginning. The real flavor comes from what gets added in: complex community experience, local knowledge, and the sparks of creativity that fly when people cook side by side. Different hands bring different spices, techniques, and tastes to the mix—and that variety is what makes the final dish truly memorable. That means the result is often more grounded in public health practice and more actionable.

Considering our goals:

Every kitchen is part of a bigger system. Designing an inclusive process means asking: Where does real decision-making happen? What change is possible now? What ripple effects might this process set in motion? In complex systems, there is rarely a single recipe or perfect result. Co-design helps hold that uncertainty, inviting us to test ingredients, explore new methods, and build shared strategies that can evolve over time

To learn more about the basics:

Designing for Growth by Jeanne Liedtka and Tim Ogilvie (excerpt here) – a practical guide to applying design thinking in complex settings. They have a useful framework of "What is, "What if," "What wows" and "What works" to work through the lifecycle of a design process.

The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design by IDEO.org – a fantastic resource full of exercises and approaches rooted in equity and community engagement. Their site includes a free overview guide and links to a free online training.

"Design Thinking Comes of Age" in Harvard Business Review – offering a broader view of how this mindset is transforming fields beyond design.

Human Centered Design for Health - feasures an in-depth collection of case studies, guides, and tools demonstrating how human-centered design can be applied specifically in the context of global health and social impact.

The Recipe in Action

Every good dish starts with intention. Take time to reflect on your goals and what you hope to create together.

Begin your co-design process by clarifying your purpose, identifying key stakeholders, and aligning on the broader context. This is your time to gather and prep your ingredients.

- What is the challenge or opportunity you're addressing? (this includes ripple effects).
- Who is most affected by this issue?
- Who needs to be involved in shaping the response?
- What decisions are on the table, and how will they be made?
- How can we build transparency into our process?
- What kinds of evidence or knowledge will guide the process?

The Kitchen Vibe

Values and Atmosphere

While strategy gives co-design structure, values-driven planning gives it soul. The emotional tone of the room is the foundation on which trust, creativity, and connection are built.

Setting the kitchen vibe means creating a space where people feel welcomed, respected, and safe enough to be vulnerable, which supports honesty, insight, and imagination.

One way to start setting this tone is by co-creating community agreements. These are more than just ground rules; they're like a shared kitchen code. They invite participants to define how they want to cook together—how they'll communicate, share space, and resolve tension. Phrases like "assume good intent," "step up/step back," or "listen to understand" may emerge. The process of naming these norms together helps surface group values and builds a sense of ownership.

A kitchen vibe is also created through sensory cues. Welcoming signage, nourishing snacks, natural light, background music, or items to fidget with can all signal that this space is designed

for humans. These touches tell people they're not just here to work; they're here to be seen and cared for. Story-based ice-breakers and check-ins like "what's a favorite meal from your childhood?" help people settle in, connect, and bring more of themselves to the table.

Designing with heart also means being attentive to who's in the kitchen—and who's missing. True inclusion requires both presence and influence. Who is in control of the decision-making? Are there barriers to participation—whether linguistic, cultural, physical, or structural? What power dynamics need to be named or softened? Setting a strong kitchen vibe means thinking through these dynamics with intention and planning for equity, not just attendance.

To build your capacity in this area, the following resources are rich with wisdom:

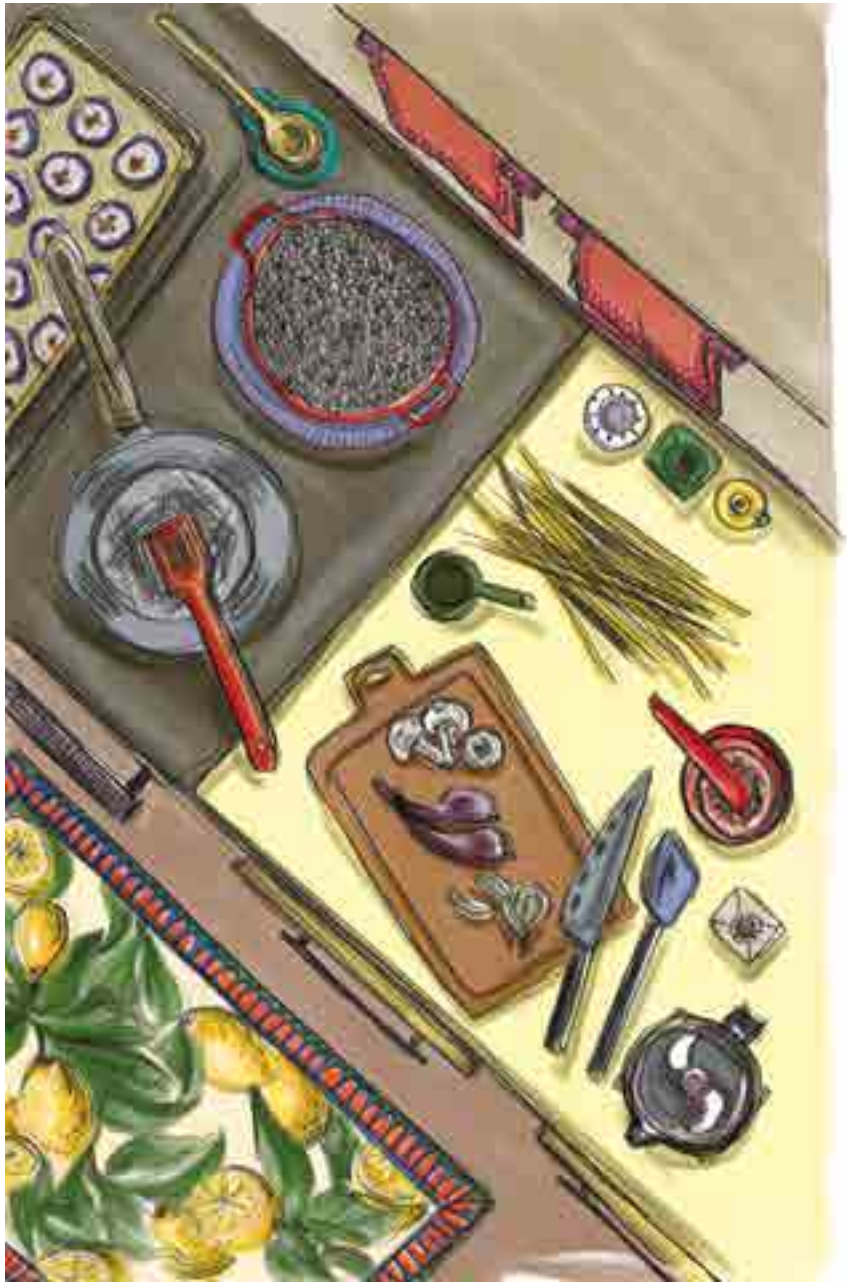
- Emergent Strategy by adrienne maree brown – on adaptive, relationship-based approaches to change.
- The Art of Gathering by Priya Parker – exploring how to shape gatherings that are meaningful and transformative.
- Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer – a poetic reflection on reciprocity, relationship, and the natural world.

The Kitchen Vibe: Values and Atmosphere

Here, you'll think about the atmosphere you want to build - one that feels safe, welcoming, and energizing for everyone.

Create a space that invites openness, trust, and emotional safety. Think about how to design an environment that will support connection and care.

1. What values do you want to guide this co-design effort?
2. How will you create a welcoming, inclusive atmosphere? How can we support all participants to engage fully? (This might include attention to accessibility, managing power dynamics, and creating a safe space.)
3. What community agreements or norms will help shape group behavior?
4. How will you attend to emotional and sensory experiences in the space?
5. Who is not in the room, and how can their perspectives be included?



Time to Cook

Tools and Facilitation

Putting ideas into action takes more than a good recipe—it takes work. It's the hands-on part of co-design: the techniques, timing, and intuitive adjustments that bring strategy and values to life. This is the moment when ingredients come off the shelf and start being chopped, stirred, and combined.

A well-run co-design session balances structure and spontaneity—like following a recipe while knowing when to add a pinch more salt or turn down the heat. Too much structure can stifle creativity or reinforce hierarchy. Too little, and people may feel lost or unsure how to participate. The art lies in providing just enough structure to keep things moving, while leaving room for surprises.

One way to strike this balance is by grounding the session in a thoughtfully sequenced "menu" of activities. For instance, a "***brainstorming and downloading***" exercise might invite participants to think big about the issue at hand. It can help to structure the conversation, e.g., to name what they know, what they assume, what they don't know, and what they're curious about. Like laying out your ingredients before you start cooking, this simple exercise helps identify what's on hand—and what's missing—without judgment.

As ideas begin to flow, we want to start to look for ***patterns and themes ("affinity mapping").*** Tools like affinity mapping can help organize the download session into something more digestible. Like sorting ingredients into prep bowls, this activity takes what may feel like a scattered array and reveals patterns and themes.

From there, teams can move into ***ideation***—mixing insights, lived experience, and bold new ideas. We want to promote creativity and get participants excited about finding new and innovative solutions to the problems we are focusing on. This might include brainstorming activities, where participants are encouraged to address the issues in wild new ways. There are no wrong answers here—we want to get everything on the table and then see what resonates.

The shift from ideas to ***building rough models*** (or ***prototypes***) is like testing a new recipe. Prototypes don't need to be polished; they just need to be tangible enough to work with. For example, participants might share their rough ideas through acting out what would happen, a sketch, or a rough model made with Play-Dough. Not every dish will make it to the table in this round. Some ideas spark insight or raise new questions. Others plant seeds for future recipes. The goal is to make thinking visible—so it can be tasted, tested, and refined.

Throughout it all, facilitation is key: part guide, part host, part safety check. Good facilitators manage timing without rushing, read the energy of the room, and make subtle decisions in the moment—whether to stir or let things simmer, when to move on or lean in. They notice who's contributing and who isn't, adjust the heat if tensions rise, and make sure every- one has a hand in the meal.

Improvisation is another essential skill. This might include games where one person offers a sentence and the next person says "Yes, and..." then adds to the story. Or it might be an activity where people come up with ad campaigns for ridiculous products, like sandpaper socks, reminding participants to work with what we've got and adjust on the fly. Progress often comes not from perfect execution but from trial, reflection, and iteration. Structured improvisation exercises, often adapted from theater or creative practices, can help build trust, and shift into more generative thinking.

In the end, it's not just about which activity you choose—it's about the environment you create. When people feel safe, seen, and supported, they're more likely to take risks, bring their full selves, and co-create something nourishing.

For those looking to build out their facilitation practice, consider exploring:

- Gamestorming by Dave Gray, Sunni Brown, and James Macanufo – Offers a wide range of creative activities to support group work.
- The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making by Sam Kaner – A classic resource for navigating inclusive group processes.

Time to Cook: Tools and Facilitation

Before any cooking begins, there's prep to be done. This section helps you plan facilitation techniques, choose tools, and outline the sequence of activities that will bring your co-design to life.

Plan the structure and activities that will guide your session. Balance structure and flow to help ideas come to life.

- What activities will help bring out knowledge and generate ideas?
- Where in the agenda will you include space for improvisation or play?
- What prototyping* tools or methods will support idea development?
- How will you document key themes or outputs?
- How will the facilitation approach support inclusion and adaptability?

* In co-design, prototyping means creating a simple, tangible version of an idea—like a sketch, mock-up, or role-play—to explore, test, and refine it collaboratively before investing in a final version.

The Meal & Beyond

Movement and Practice

Co-design isn't just about planning or preparing—it's about what happens when the meal is served, and what carries forward after the table is cleared. This is the stage where the experience is digested, shared, and extended. It's where movement happens—through action, reflection, and follow-through.

A well-paced co-design process includes time for pause and tasting along the way. These moments—whether through small group reflection, journaling, or collective check-ins—are like tasting the dish along the way. They allow for course correction, emerging flavors, and naming what's working. Reflection isn't separate from the doing; it's part of the process. It helps participants tune in to changes in energy, direction, and understanding.

Feedback and iteration are also key ingredients. What felt nourishing? What left a bitter aftertaste? These reflections help refine future sessions and support deeper learning. Capturing quotes, sketches, takeaways, or unexpected "ahas" helps preserve the richness of the experience—like saving a beloved recipe or writing notes in the margins for next time.

Then there's what comes after the meal. What happens to the ideas that were cooked up together? Who carries them forward? Who sets the table next time? Follow-through matters. It might involve identifying champions who keep the energy alive, setting up accountability structures, or inviting people into next steps with clarity and care. Sometimes it's as simple as saying thank you and celebrating what was created together.

Co-design is rarely one and done. Its real power shows up as new relationships, unexpected insights, or ideas that blossom later. Like a good meal, it fills you up in the moment and lingers afterward, shaping how you show up the next time.

To support long-term thinking, you might turn to:

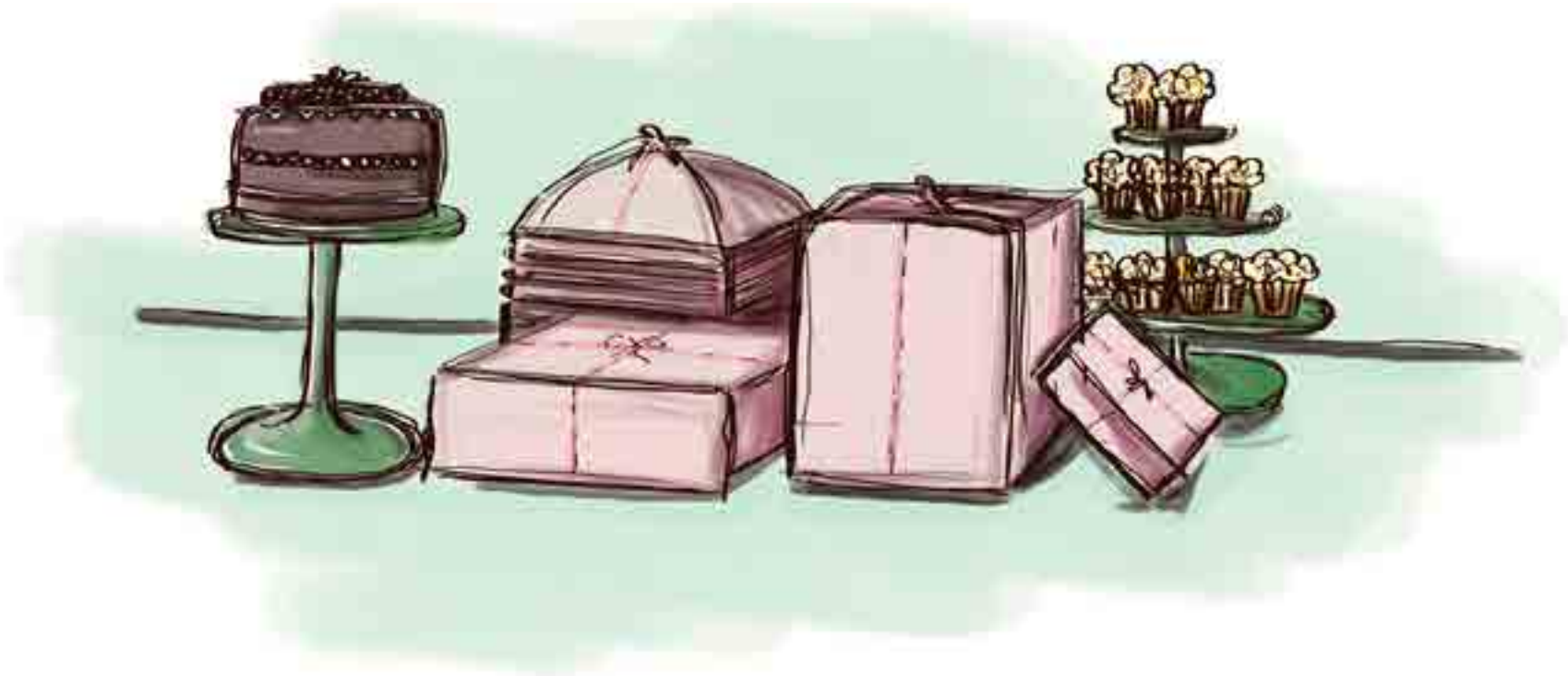
- Show Your Work! by Austin Kleon – Encourages transparency and ongoing sharing in creative work.
- Making Futures: Marginal Notes on Innovation, Design, and Democracy, edited by Pelle Ehn, Elisabet M. Nilsson, and Richard Topgaard - Explores participatory and democratic approaches to innovation and design, emphasizing grassroots initiatives and community-driven projects.
- IDEO.og's free, 7-week, online course on human-centered design will guide you through their four-step process to develop innovative, real-world solutions tailored to people's needs.

Sending leftovers home

What's served at the table matters, and so does what happens after the meal. Use these questions to think about how you'll carry ideas forward, keep momentum, and ensure that the learning sticks.

Capture learning, celebrate wins, and build for sustainability.

- What forms of reflection will you build into the process?
- How will you gather feedback and adapt for next time?
- What documentation will help preserve insights and progress?
- What next steps or accountability structures are needed?
- How will you ensure the work continues beyond the session?



Unwrapped: A case study

Now that we have shared some big ideas, we want to give you a concrete example. ***Unwrapped*** was a co-design initiative that brought together individuals from across the LGBTQ+ community—ranging from community members to program administrators and public health staff—to reimagine how tobacco-related messaging developed in academic and research settings could be translated into messages and mechanisms that would resonate in community contexts. The goal wasn't simply to refine language, but to shift how public health communication is shaped, shared, and received—grounded in lived experience, cultural nuance, and mutual respect.

The Recipe

Unwrapped Strategy and Foundation

Project Goals: We started by identifying a central challenge: how might we transform tobacco messaging rooted in academic research into something that resonates more deeply with community organizations serving LGBTQ+ communities?

Format: We designed ***Unwrapped*** as a two-step experience: a 60-minute virtual session followed by an all-day, in-person workshop. The virtual session introduced the project's purpose, helped participants begin building connections, and started to surface key priorities. By laying this groundwork, the in-person session was able to move more quickly into deeper conversations and tangible ideas. This structure supported accessibility, comfort, and relationship-building, setting the stage for thoughtful engagement across both sessions.

Theme: To tie the experience together and infuse it with warmth (and because this took place in the month of December), we chose gifts as an overarching metaphor. This theme was present in everything from the room signage and framing language to the activities we facilitated—including a gift-themed icebreaker, a playful Yankee Swap, and chair massages.

Notetaking: As part of our approach to communication and creativity, we chose to bring in a visual note taker for the in-person session. This decision helped document and reflect back the

group's ideas as they were taking shape, offering another mode for absorbing and engaging with the conversation. Early in the day, the artist introduced herself and explained her role in the room, then offered a short lesson on visual note taking.

Agenda: We developed a full-day, in-person experience grounded in a set of structured activities that first encouraged participants to share a wide range of ideas and perspectives—and then identified themes and possibilities to explore more deeply. To support the day, we created two versions of the agenda: one detailed version for facilitators that outlined timing, materials, and cues, and a simplified version for participants that made the day's activities clear and easy to follow. Each served its purpose by offering the right level of information to meet the needs of its audience.

This process of first gathering a wide range of ideas and then narrowing them down (sometimes called diverging and converging) helped participants to think expansively while also working toward practical results. The overarching structure provided enough structure for focus, while still allowing for creativity, unexpected ideas, and collective insights.

Full day agenda overview for participants

Unwrapped Full Day Workshop
December 15, 2023

Time	Length	Activity	Details	Outcomes	Roles	Materials	Notes
9:00 AM	0:15:00	Arrivals and breakfast	Arrive, check in, settle in to the space		Michelle meets people in lobby/in elevator	food and drink	
9:15 AM	0:25:00	Welcome and Introduction	Setting the purpose of the workshop, group mindfulness, establishing mindsets, setting ground rules, review themes and contexts. Discuss what are we hoping to achieve, and establish what success look like	The group has clear expectations of the day ahead	Keri		Includes 10 minute mindfulness/meditation session
9:40 AM	0:20:00	Warm up: Alternative Uses	In small teams, examine known/familiar objects and apply them in new ways. Each team then presents/models each alternative use. Goal is to foster and encourage creativity and get participants engaged with each other right away.	Mentally conducive to ideation	Michelle	Selected objects (frisbee, flashlight, book, etc)	Open a gift to find your item
10:00 AM	0:45:00	Downloading	Break into three groups. Building upon what was started in the virtual call. Break things down to unpack facts, assumptions, unknowns/questions. Acknowledge and learn about each other's perspective on the overarching questions being address.	Lots of clay to work with. Identify knowns, unknowns, assumptions, and questions with regards to our core question.	Jodi	whiteboard and/or large post its, smaller post its	30 minutes of group working, 10 minutes of round robin, 10 minutes of regrouping/time
10:45 AM	0:15:00	Break					
11:00 AM	0:30:00	Affinity mapping	Using information presented in downloading activity, identify broader themes. Build consensus amongst themes	Synthesize ideas and create seeds for ideation	Keri	whiteboard and/or large post its, smaller post its	
11:30 AM	1:00:00	Initial ideation	Teams develop initial ideas addressing themes and contexts identified. Tools to assist include empathy maps, personas, and journey mapping	Rough ideas for refinement	Michelle	craft materials, post its, markers	40 minutes to develop, 20 minutes presentation and discussion
12:30 PM	1:00:00	Lunch	Food and Yankee Swap				Massage happening here as well
1:30 PM	1:00:00	Refine prototype and present	Build out idea in physical form - anything goes. Crafts, skits, drawings, etc.	More developed ideas for consideration	Jodi	craft materials, post its, markers	Include 10 minute gallery walk at the beginning (post lunch) to provide written feedback on post its
2:30 PM	0:10:00	Break					
2:40 PM	0:30:00	Prototype documentation	Teams complete a small set of questions on a form to submit. Representative from each group shares final writeup with	Ideas captured in a uniform way for continued development	All	Form - printed, electronic, or	

Full-day detailed agenda

The Kitchen Vibe
Atmosphere and Values

Ground rules were developed with participants

Supporting connection: From the moment participants entered the space (virtual or physical) we aimed to foster connection and authenticity. In the virtual session, the gift metaphor came to life through an icebreaker that invited participants to share the best and worst gifts they'd ever received, and why. People were incredibly open and that set the stage for deep engagement later.

Setting up the space and agenda: During the in-person workshop, we highlighted connection by choosing a relaxed, loft-style space, offering fidget toys and coloring books, making sure there were plenty of movement breaks, and ensuring facilitators maintained a light and warm tone.

We continued our theme with affirming visual cues and moments of reflection that echoed the spirit of giving and receiving. The atmosphere emphasized fun, care, and genuine appreciation for each voice in the room. One small but meaningful gesture: we brought in a massage therapist to offer ten-minute chair massages—a literal gift of rest that modeled our belief that caring for participants isn't an add-on—it's essential.

Time to Cook
Tools and Facilitation

We focused on using tools and activities that sparked creativity, trust, and bold thinking. Each part of the workshop was designed to help people build on each other's ideas, try different ways of communicating, and start shaping possible approaches. A mid-day Yankee Swap brought in some laughter and lightness, helping people connect before diving back into deeper work.

The day followed a clear arc: 1) an extended warm-up to get connection and creative juices flowing, 2) brainstorming / down-loading, 3) finding patterns and themes, and 4) gradually moving toward tangible concepts in the form of prototypes.

The morning started with breakfast and conversation, followed by introductions and an activity finding unusual uses for household objects. For example, a small flashlight became a bridge for ants. No idea was too ridiculous.

Participants then engaged in a structured ***brainstorming*** activity designed to prompt reflection and imagination. Working in small groups, they used a framework called ***downloading*** to organize their thinking into four categories—what they know, assume, don't know, and want to ask. This created space for honest conversation, surfaced powerful questions, and helped identify knowledge gaps and assumptions.

Next came a round-robin gallery walk, where participants built on one another's thinking, added fresh perspectives, and challenged

each other's assumptions in a supportive way.

We then shifted toward ***finding themes and patterns*** (also called affinity mapping)—a process of grouping related ideas to identify themes, connections, and insights. Several key themes emerged, including the importance of intergenerational spaces, the value of lived experience, the evolving nature of LGBTQ+ identity across the life course, and the need to bring funding decisions.

Building on these themes, participants moved into smaller breakout groups to ***build early prototypes***. Each group translated one of the themes into a concrete, physical representation—a prototype—ranging from storyboards to imagined spaces. These visual models allowed each team to make decisions about what to include, what to set aside, and how to communicate their ideas. The day concluded with a round of five-minute pitches, where each group presented its concept to the full room. These presentations shared not only the core ideas, but the potential impact, feasibility, and next steps.

The three final ideas that emerged from the session were likely quite different from what might have been produced through a more traditional, top-down process—and that was precisely the point. The group came up with three main ideas: a new process for funding programming, an app, called Queer Care, which focused on mutual aid and community support, and the Inter-Galactic space, which was a community center of sorts. By centering community voices and lived experience, the ideas surfaced real needs and desires that may have otherwise been overlooked. Rather than aiming for polish or finality, the goal was to generate seeds of possibility—concepts that reflected what mattered most to participants and could be nurtured into feasible next steps.

Not every moment was easy. At times, differing opinions and discomfort surfaced, especially as participants brought a range of lived experiences and priorities to the table. Facilitators worked hard to honor those moments—allowing for respectful disagreement and dialogue—while also guiding the group toward shared goals and maintaining the energy and flow of the session. This balance of structure and flexibility helped the group stay engaged, creative, and ultimately collaborative.

The Meal & Beyond

Sustainability and Follow-Through

At the close of the ***Unwrapped*** workshop, participants were invited to indicate whether they wanted their contact information shared. For those who agreed, we compiled a contact list that was shared alongside the final visual notes and summary report. This helped maintain momentum and offered a reminder of the ideas, energy, and relationships that emerged.

We also sent a holiday card to each participant after the event—part gesture of gratitude, part relationship-building strategy. It was a small but meaningful way to signal that the connections formed during Unwrapped mattered beyond the boundaries of the project. We weren't just modeling co-design; we were modeling care. And we meant it. This group left an imprint, and the follow-up was as much about authenticity as it was about best practice.

Warming Up the Kitchen

Activities That Spark the Work

Activities are like the appetizers of a co-design process—they get people in the right frame of mind, wake up the senses, and set the tone for what's to come. Just as you wouldn't jump into the main course without preheating the oven or prepping your ingredients, you wouldn't dive into a design session without first warming up the group. A well-chosen activity builds connection, trust, and creative readiness, and offers a chance to discover the unique flavors each person brings to the table, shaped by their experiences, traditions, and ways of knowing.

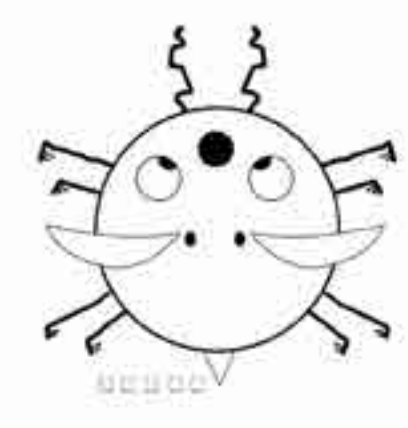
The most nourishing activities are those that fit the flavor of the gathering. They align with the purpose of the session, support the dynamics of the group, and help develop the mindset or skills needed to cook up something meaningful together. But they also benefit from a touch of seasoning, considering context, cultural references, and timing. Drawing on shared experiences, timely themes, or relatable moments (seasonally or socially) can help participants feel more grounded and more connected to one another.

What follows is a sampler of adaptable activities you can use to open sessions, shift the energy, deepen conversation, or spark joy. These are here to help get you started; there's a whole world of activities out there to explore, and we also encourage you to do a little "from scratch" cooking to create something that suits your taste and table!

Sample Warmup: Drawing Bugs

Materials needed:

Paper and pencil for each participant.



I am going to describe a drawing I have made of a bug. (Bug drawing attached) Without seeing the drawing, you are to draw the bug that I describe. You may not ask questions or talk to each other.

Describe the bug.

- The bug is round.
- The bug has eight legs, grouped in pairs with four legs on the left and four legs on the right. In the pairs, one leg is longer than the other.
- The bug has two eyes on top of the body.
- The bug has two squiggly antenna.
- The bug has two pea pod shaped wings.
- The bug has a spot next to each wing.
- The bug has a triangular stinger on the bottom of the body
- The bug has two feelers on each foot - one longer than the other, both coming from the same side of the leg.
- The bug has a round mouth, placed between the two eyes.
- The bug laid five square eggs to the left of the stinger.

After everyone is finished... Hold up your bug so others in your group can see. Note some of the similarities and differences. Show the drawing to the entire group.

Discussion questions:

- Why don't all the bugs look like mine? (Interpretation: everyone has a different interpretation, based on his or her experiences.)
- What did you think of first when you were told to draw a bug? What did you see in your mind?
- What could we have done differently so that your drawings and mine would have looked more alike?
- What would have been the advantages of allowing questions to be asked?
- How many of you wanted questions to be asked?

Adapted from A Kaleidoscope of Leadership, Minnesota Extension Service

Building Early Models (Prototyping)

Purpose

Participants have a chance to translate their ideas into early versions of solutions to play with and support iteration.

Instructions

Time: 45 minutes

Group Size: Small groups

Materials:

- Large sheets of paper, pens, markers, sharpies
- Modeling clay
- Re-used materials, e.g., egg cartons, cardboard boxes, etc. Post-it Notes

Step-by-Step Guide

Prompt:

1. Each group will build a prototype (or rough model) of their solution of choice. They can do this using physical materials, e.g., cardboard boxes or write out a process, e.g., a map of how a client might interact with a service.
2. Each group will present their prototype to other groups and refine based on feedback.

Debrief:

As a full group, participants will discuss ideas that came up for them during the prototype presentations. They will highlight the big picture takeaways that they want to ensure are integrated into the solutions that might be planned in the future.

Alternative Uses

Purpose

Spark creativity, stretch the imagination, and loosen up group thinking.

Time: 10–15 minutes

Group Size: 2–6 participants per group (scale up for large groups)

Materials: A common household or office object per group (e.g., masking tape, spoon, flashlight, paperclip, rubber band, etc.)

Instructions

Introduce the Activity (2 minutes)
Explain to participants that the goal is to think as creatively and unexpectedly as possible. Say something like:

"You're going to receive an everyday object. Your job is to come up with as many alternative uses for that object as you can—the more creative or ridiculous, the better. Just one rule: you cannot describe the object being used for its typical purpose."

Form Small Groups (1 minute)
Divide participants into small groups (2–6 people each). Provide each group with the same object or a different object, depending on your goals.

Brainstorm (5–7 minutes)
Each group brainstorms alternative uses for the object. Encourage them to go for quantity, not perfection. They can build on each other's ideas or go in wild directions.

Examples for a roll of masking tape:

- Tiny hat
- DIY napkin ring
- Emergency coaster
- Mini stage for ants
- Bracelet

Share Out (5 minutes)
Invite each group to share a few of their favorite or most absurd ideas with the larger group. Applause or laughter encouraged!

Optional Twist
For added energy, turn it into a competition: Which group can come up with the most uses in a set time?

Or assign a specific category (e.g., only uses related to travel, education, or aliens).

Debrief (Optional – 3 minutes)
Ask a few reflection questions:

- What made this hard or easy?
- Did you notice when your ideas started getting more creative?
- How might this kind of imaginative thinking help us in our everyday work?

Yes, and...

Purpose: To build creative momentum, encourage active listening, and practice collective idea generation. This improv-inspired game helps groups loosen up, connect, and think expansively—no judgment, just fun.

Time Needed: 10–15 minutes

Group Size: 4–25 participants (Small groups or full circle both work)

Instructions

Gather your group in a circle or at a table where everyone can hear one another.

Introduce the premise:

This is an improvisational storytelling game. One person will start with a spontaneous idea or scenario—the sillier, the better! For example: "Let's build a playground on the roof."

Go clockwise around the group.

Each person must begin their contribution with the phrase "Yes, and..." Their job is to accept the idea and build on it:

- "Yes, and we'll only allow entrance by trampoline."
- "Yes, and there will be a juice bar run by squirrels."
- "Yes, and the slide will go down five stories and land in a ball pit made of marshmallows."

Keep going until everyone has had at least one turn. Optionally, continue until the energy naturally wraps up or someone delivers a good "ending" line.

Debrief (optional):

Ask:

- How did it feel to build on each other's ideas?
- What was easy or challenging about saying "yes, and"?
- What does this teach us about collaboration and co-creation?

Tips:

Encourage humor and absurdity—this is about energy and spontaneity, not perfection.

If someone struggles to come up with something, the group can offer playful encouragement.

If you have a large group, break into smaller circles of 5–8.

Say It Like You Mean It

Make a Sandwich

Purpose

This activity illustrates the challenges of clear communication, the importance of shared understanding, and the hidden assumptions we carry into collaborative work. It's a playful reminder that what seems obvious to one person may not be to another.

Instructions

Time: 10–15 minutes

Group Size: Pairs or small groups

Materials:

- A table and chair
- A loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, a butter knife, a plate (real or pretend)
- Optional: substitute any non-allergenic spread (e.g., sunflower butter) or act it out with props only

Step-by-Step Guide

1. Set the Scene: One person is the Director. The other is the Sandwich Maker. The Sandwich Maker may only do exactly and literally what they are told—no improvisation allowed.
2. Give the Prompt: The Director must instruct the Sandwich Maker to make a peanut butter sandwich. They should give one step at a time, waiting to see what happens after each instruction.
3. Play It Out: The Sandwich Maker follows the instructions to the letter, even if it results in absurd or inefficient actions. For example, if they say "Put the peanut butter on the bread," but the jar isn't open, they may just set the jar on top of the loaf.
4. Watch What Happens: Let the hilarity (and the insight) unfold. Stop after 5–7 minutes or once a sandwich is made (or the group dissolves in laughter).
5. Debrief Together: Discuss as a group:
    - What did the Director assume?
    - Where did the breakdowns happen?
    - How does this relate to communication in co-design?
    - What might this activity reveal about clarity, inclusion, and shared language?

Debrief Prompts

- Where did you notice assumptions?
- How might this apply when working across cultures, disciplines, or lived experiences?
- What are ways we can slow down to build shared understanding?

Finding Themes and Patterns

Purpose

This activity helps organize participants' thoughts about the challenge at hand, while keeping a spirit of creativity.

Instructions

Time: 20 minutes

Group Size: Small groups

Materials:

- Large sheets of paper (1-2 per group)
- An easel or painter's tape to stick these to the wall

Step-by-Step Guide

1. Identify a notetaker or notetakers for the group.
2. Give the Prompt: The group should look at the information from the brainstorming/ downloading exercise. If that data can be physically moved (like Post-Its), the group can sort ideas into clusters of ideas.
3. The notetaker(s) will then write down high-level themes the group comes up with. For example, several Post-Its may describe disconnects between funders and community organizations, so this becomes a theme. As part of describing the theme, the group can come up with a metaphor, say a picture of people riding different subway trains and passing through the same station, but heading different places.
4. Debrief Together: Ask one member of each group to talk the other groups through the themes they identified and the metaphors that resonated. Ask the other groups to respond and potentially offer other metaphors that describe the theme.
5. Prioritize (optional): If participants are ready, this can be a good time to consolidate themes across groups and identify the ones the full group wants to prioritize in terms of developing rough models (prototypes). They may want to consider what makes a solution likely to have an impact and identify things they need to know more about before moving forward.

Brainstorming and Downloading

Purpose

This activity gets participants to think of a wide range of ideas linked to the challenge at hand.

Instructions

Time: 60 minutes

Group Size: Small groups

Materials:

- 4 large sheets of paper
- Post-it Notes
- Pens or sharpies
- An easel or painter's tape to stick these to the wall

Step-by-Step Guide

1. For each group, mark the four sheets with these titles: What we know, what we assume, what we don't know, and what we want to ask.
2. Identify a notetaker or notetakers for the group.
3. Give the Prompt: For each sheet, the notetaker will write down the key ideas the group comes up with for each of the four topics. Each idea will go on a post-it, while will be posted on the relevant sheet.
4. Prompts: It may be helpful to prompt the group to think about different actors that engage with the issue. For example, if they are **working on increasing mental health services in schools, they** might consider the perspectives of students, families, teachers and other staff, principals, and others who either impact or are impacted by this issue. You can offer them prompts to think about how each group thinks and feels about the issue, what they might want to change / keep the same, and how their actions impact the issue.
5. It can also be helpful to prompt participants to think about the journey that the affected individuals take, e.g., the process of identifying a mental health service need, seeking it out (both in and out of school), engaging with services (or not), and then next steps in the journey.
6. Debrief Together: Ask one member of each group to talk the other groups through the ideas they thought were important. Other groups can add their suggestions that are different from the ones already shared.

Last but not least...

This handbook is offered freely by the Outreach Core of the U54 Partnership between the Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center and UMass Boston. Contributors have expertise in public health, co-design, implementation science, health equity, health communication, and more.

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