Dr. Martin Fishbein, world-renowned behavioral theorist who provided the basis for the development and study of behavioral interventions for a wide array of health behaviors, and who was the principal scientist of ground-breaking human immunodeficiency virus/sexually transmitted infection (HIV/STI) prevention studies in the 1980s and 1990s, died suddenly on November 27, 2009 while visiting London with his wife Debby. He was 73 years old.

After receiving his doctorate in psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, Marty started his long and productive career at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. There he pursued his pioneering work on human behavior and cognitive factors associated with behavior change that ultimately culminated in the book, Belief, Attitude, Intention and Behavior: An Introduction to Theory and Research, published in 1975. In this book, he formulated the Theory of Reasoned Action that has since been intrinsically linked to his name. In a 1996 Public Health Reports article, he described the theory as follows:

“According to the theory of reasoned action, performance or nonperformance of a given behavior is primarily determined by the strength of a person’s intention to perform (or to not perform) that behavior, where intention is defined as the subjective likelihood that one will perform (or try to perform) the behavior in question. The intention to perform a given behavior is, in turn, viewed as a function of 2 basic factors: the person’s attitude toward performing the behavior (one’s overall positive or negative feeling about personally performing the behavior) and/or the person’s subjective norm concerning the behavior (the person’s perception of normative pressure to perform [or to not perform] the behavior in question). The theory of reasoned action also considers the determinants of attitudes and subjective norms. Attitudes are viewed as a function of behavioral belief (beliefs that performing the behavior will lead to certain outcomes) and their evaluative aspects (the evaluation of these outcomes); subjective norms are viewed as a function of normative beliefs (beliefs that a specific individual or group thinks one should or should not perform the behavior in question) and motivations to comply (the degree to which, in general, one wants [or does not want] to do what the referent thinks one should do). Generally, the more one believes that performing the behavior will lead to positive outcomes or will prevent negative outcomes, the more favorable will be one’s attitude toward performing the behavior. Similarly, the more one believes that specific referents (individuals or groups) think that one should (or should not) perform the behavior, and the more one is motivated to comply with those referents, the stronger will be the perceived pressure (the subjective norm) to perform (or to not perform) that behavior.”

Over the years, influenced by his own research as well as by that of others, the Theory of Reasoned Action evolved into an integrative model of behavioral prediction that considered other factors in addition to those already previously included. Just recently, together with his long-term collaborator Icek Ajzen, he published the latest update of what is now called the “reasoned action approach.” His work has been included in standard social psychology text books around the world and has been used as the basis for the study of a large spectrum of behavioral interventions.

However, Marty was not only interested in the academic and theoretical aspects of behavior change; he was also actively involved with applying behavior change theory in public health practice. In 1988, he became a consultant for the National Institutes of Mental Health Program on AIDS to advise on the development of interventions to reduce HIV/STI risk behaviors. Around the same time, he became the lead scientist on the AIDS Community Demonstration Projects (now known as Community Promise), a multicenter, community-level behavioral intervention study, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In subsequent years, he extended his ties with CDC and became the lead behavioral scientist for Project Respect, an individual-level counseling intervention to reduce risks for HIV/STI. Project Respect was the first multicenter, randomized behavioral intervention trial to demonstrate the efficacy of 2 short, structured client-centered counseling sessions on the risk of subsequent STI, and has since become one of the gold standards in HIV/STI prevention research. The main outcomes paper from the trial, published in JAMA in 1998, was awarded the Charles C. Shepard Science Award, the highest scientific honor bestowed annually at CDC. Marty concluded his tenure at CDC as the acting branch chief in the Behavioral Intervention and Research Branch in the Division of STD Prevention in 1997 when he became the Harry C. Coles Distinguished Professor in Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania where he remained until his death.

Yet, Marty was much more than a brilliant theorist and real-world behavioral scientist. He was above all a warm and generous human being who loved to mix collegiality with friendship. This made him an ideal mentor, especially to those of us who were not primarily schooled in the behavioral sciences and who had the privilege to learn from one of the field’s preeminent representatives. While holding his own on the scientific stage, off-stage he was unassuming and soft-spoken—genuinely interested in the lives of his friends and colleagues and always willing to share a good meal and a glass of wine along with selfless offers of scientific support—often in the same setting.

Among his many contributions, Marty’s name will continue to be linked to the international AIDS Impact conference, for which he served on the Board of Directors. While in London, the day before his death, he had been named as the conference organizer for the 2011 AIDS Impact conference in Santa Fe, NM. Rather than being organized by him, the conference will now be held in his honor.

It is difficult to imagine a life without Marty’s humor and compassion. Our thoughts go out to his wife and partner for life Debby—the day after Christmas, just a month after his death, marked their 50th wedding anniversary.