

Strategic sharing tip-sheet:

Tips for sharing your story in a safe and effective way

If you've experienced and overcome a particular type of adversity, you may be in a unique position to be a voice for others who are experiencing a similar situation. Becoming an advocate and telling the story of your experiences – both your challenges and successes – is a worthwhile endeavor with undeniable benefits. Some of the main reasons to tell your story include:

To educate. By sharing your story, you're teaching your audience something – not in the academic sense, more so in the spiritual sense. You're offering them a window into the reality of children, youth and families accessing care, helping them understand what it's like to be on your end of things. That kind of knowledge can be just as powerful as any formal teachings, if not more.

To promote positive change. Your story is a tool to help humanize the system user experience; it puts a face on what people might otherwise only know as bland facts. Don't underestimate how powerful that can be. After hearing your story, people are much more likely to get up, take action and make change happen because they can actually see the hope for change in you.

To become empowered. Sharing your story is something you can do for yourself, too. Talking about your experiences can be extremely healing – even more so by using your experiences to educate and help others. Advocacy is a way to assert your identity and your place in the world, helping you gain confidence, self-efficacy and leadership skills.

Here are things you can do to increase your impact and make the most out of the experience while mitigating the risks associated with advocacy work. This tip-sheet will take you through considerations for sharing your story as effectively and safely as possible.

1. Telling an effective story. The secret to successful advocacy is telling an impactful story. Learning how to tell your story effectively will help you and your audience get the most out of the experience. Consider these tips on how to be an effective advocate:

- **Know your audience.** To maximize your use of time and increase your pertinence, make sure you know who your audience is and what information is relevant and important for them to hear. Stay mindful of the different ways your audience might receive or interpret your story based on their professional, social and cultural background.
- **Know your event.** Keep the objective(s) of the event in mind and how your story relates to that.
- **Put a spotlight the important stuff.** Find the *knowledge nuggets* of your presentation – the core pieces of your story that will resonate and *stick* with your audience while bringing attention to them. You can explicitly tell your audience which parts of your story may be most helpful or important for them to remember.
- **Let the data do some of the work.** While much of your impact will come from telling a story that's personal and authentic, you can add relevance and credibility by using research findings and statistics to underpin specific points you want to get across.

2. Protecting your relationships. While it's only natural that your story will feature different individuals, openly talking about these people and how they impacted you can be a sensitive and tricky thing. Consider these tips on how to protect your relationships:

- **Talk it over.** Whenever possible, talk with the people that you want to mention in your story. Find out what they want you to share and what they prefer you leave out or keep confidential.
- **Keep it confidential.** Unless the concerned people give you permission, leave names or unnecessarily specific professional roles out of your stories. For example, don't give out the names of people like your case worker, relative or colleague, even if what you want to share about them is positive.
- **Be strengths-based.** You might be more inclined to talk about the people who you feel negatively impacted you. While those negative relationships can be important to mention to get your point across, don't let them overshadow your purpose in sharing. Look for ways to balance out the negative with the positive. Focus on the helpful or positive things people did for you and the transformative relationships you've had.
- **Choose your words wisely.** Avoid talking about people in an overly blaming, accusatory or passive-aggressive manner. Simple changes in wording can often avoid conflict.

3. Minimizing your exposure to stigma. We can't fight stigma if we're afraid of owning our own experiences, and thus, to an extent, sharing your story *is* about being vulnerable. With that said, there's a balance you can strike to protect yourself. Consider the following tips to minimize your exposure to stigma:

- **Set your limits.** Decide what you're comfortable with people knowing –there's no reason you have to tell your entire story. While some people feel comfortable relaying very raw, personal details, you can certainly choose to leave those details out and still be an effective advocate.
- **Choose your audience.** Some audiences may be more or less receptive or judgmental to what you put forward. Choosing your audience can give you that bit of control on the reactions and attitudes you'll be facing.

4. Attending to your emotional well-being. As sharing your story may bring up painful memories, it's possible to stir up negative emotions. Learning to manage those emotions is important for the sake of delivering an effective presentation that draws attention to what you're *saying*, as opposed to what you're *feeling*. Besides, your emotional well-being should always be your number one priority. Consider these tips to help you process emotions more effectively:

- **Practice your presentation.** Don't let the emotional turmoil hit you all at once on the big day. Run through your presentation at least a few times on your own or in front of people you trust. This will help to de-sensitize and habituate you to some of the more emotion-filled content.
- **Identify your weak spots.** Try to put your finger on the possible triggers (i.e. the parts of your story that might cause you to feel sad, distressed, angry, etc.). Limit the amount of detail you discuss about these things – or avoid talking about them altogether – until you're ready.
- **Talk it out.** Talk with a trusted friend or a mental health professional before and/or after sharing your story. This can help to relieve any turmoil or negative emotions you're experiencing. In addition, you can communicate any foreseeable issues to your event support before your presentation.
- **Develop a safety plan.** A safety plan is a process that you set in place in case you're triggered. For instance, you can come up with something to say to your audience if the emotions get to you during your presentation. Write down a few numbers to call after the presentation (e.g. Kids Help Phone, Good2Talk, trusted friend, counsellor), along with some concrete strategies to help relieve the negative emotions (e.g. deep breathing techniques, relaxing activities you enjoy).

5. Answering difficult questions. During a presentation, people may ask you difficult questions that you feel are inappropriate or make you uncomfortable. Consider these strategies to handle difficult questions:

- **Redirect to the purpose.** If you get a question that you feel is too far outside the scope of your message or purpose in sharing, consider saying something like “Thanks for your comments. There’s so much we could talk about. Let’s focus our attention on our purpose for gathering today, which is ... ” and move on.
- **Reframe to the general issue.** If you receive a question that you feel is overly personal, you can re-frame it and relate it back to a more general issue. Consider saying something like “Many young people, like me, have experienced this at some point in their lives. We can help to change this by...” and go on with more general facts.
- **Redirect to the audience.** If you receive a question that you simply don’t have an answer to, you can open the question up to the audience. Consider saying something like “Great question. Let’s see what others have to say on this issue. Does anyone have any insights on this?”. This strategy gives the audience the chance to put themselves in your shoes momentarily, which can be very effective.
- **Politely decline.** You never have to answer any question you don’t want to. If you receive a question that you simply feel uncomfortable answering, you can say something like “That’s something I’d prefer not to talk about” or “That’s something I’ll keep private. Thanks for understanding. Next question?”.
- **Turn to the event support.** Normally, someone from the event will be supporting you throughout your presentation, either as a co-presenter, moderator or host. You can always give them a heads-up that you may need support during the question period.

6. Debriefing the event. Debriefing after each event with the on-site clinical support or event host is one of the most beneficial things that you can do for yourself as an advocate. It’s a period for structured reflection and feedback that can provide you with both emotional and informational support, helping you better prepare for the next time you present. Consider this checklist of questions you can explore during your debriefing period:

- Were there any logistical issues (e.g. finding the location of the venue, travel, hotel, honorarium)?
- Do you feel like your objective(s) was/were accomplished?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Did anything go poorly?
- Was there anything you’d like to improve on?
- Did you have enough on-site support?¹

References

- Building Bridges Initiative (n.d.) Peer youth advocates in residential programs. Retrieved from <http://www.buildingbridges4youth.org/sites/default/files/BBI%20Peer%20Youth%20Advocate%20Handbook%20FINAL.pdf>
- Casey Family Programs & Foster Care Alumni of America. (n.d.) Strategic Sharing. http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/download/StrategicSharing.pdf
- Davidson, L., Bellamy, C., Guy, K., & Miller, R. (2012). Peer support among persons with severe mental illnesses: a review of evidence and experience. *World Psychiatry, 11*(2), 123-128.
- Lulow, E., & Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health. (2012). Strategic Sharing Workbook: Youth Voice in Advocacy. Portland, OR: Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures.
- Repper, J., & Watson, E. (2012). A year of peer support in Nottingham: lessons learned. *The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education and Practice, 7*(2), 70-78.
- SAMHSA (2005) Building a foundation for Recovery. A Community Education guide on Establishing Medicaid funded Peer Support Services and a Peer Trained Workforce. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
- Shepherd, G., Boardman, J., Rinaldi, M., & Roberts, G. (2014). 8. Supporting recovery in mental health services: Quality and Outcomes. *Implementing Recovery Through Organisational Change, London*.
- Walker, J. S., Geenen, S., Thorne, E., & Powers, L. E. (2009). Improving outcomes through interventions that increase youth empowerment and self-determination. *Focal Point: Research, Policy, and Practice in Children's Mental Health, 23*(2), 13-16.