

Strategic Story Telling: Guidelines for Victims, Survivors and Family Members of Mass Violence Incidents (MVIs)

Sharing your story with others can be very empowering. However, it is important that you do this in a meaningful, effective, and safe way. This tip sheet can help you make intentional choices about how and when to share your story.

What are some ways you can share your story?

There are multiple ways to share your story as a victim, survivor, or family member impacted by an MVI, which may assist others in their healing and recovery. Some examples include:

- Speaking at public events
- Providing peer support
- Attending support groups as a mentor
- Organizing/participating in community activities
- Speaking at small group meetings
- Joining task forces for policy change
- Being a spokesperson to the media
- Sharing in online forums or social media

What are your reasons for sharing your story?

Victims, survivors, and family members share their stories for many different reasons. Before sharing, it is important to identify your reasons and ask yourself if these fit into your goals for recovery. Sharing is a personal experience that can be helpful in different ways, including:

- Personalizes the loss and trauma
- Helps us make sense and meaning out of our experiences
- Helps change stereotypes and assumptions, and reduces stigma
- Engages our imagination and helps us see new possibilities for our recovery
- Helps in building relationships and establishing a supportive community
- Can lead to growth and change in our own lives and in the lives of others
- Can help us learn about and understand our own culture and identity

Risks of sharing your story

While sharing your story can be helpful, some survivors experience risks, including:

- Being labeled as a “survivor” or “victim” and being put into a box
- Feelings of vulnerability
- Triggering of unresolved trauma
- Experiencing sharing *remorse*
- Making listeners feel uncomfortable
- Burnout or secondary victimization

In addition, sharing online comes with a unique set of risks. In online forums (e.g., social media websites, blog pages), there is very little control over who has access to what you share. Individuals are vulnerable to increased exposure, unsolicited reactions, and information being taken out of context. If you decide to share online, consider creating a safe and established environment or finding one that already exists.

How do you decide on when to become involved and how much of your story to share?

These questions can help you make your decision:

- What is your purpose for sharing? What do you hope to accomplish by sharing this part of your life? What specific details are most important to share?
- What do you hope your audience's response will be? What actions do you want them take?
- What are the benefits and risks to sharing your story?

How to develop your story:

Claim your experience. It is very important to claim your experience by identifying the meaning and significance it has for you. Remember, YOU have the power to interpret your own experiences in any way. In addition, it is okay to show emotion and be vulnerable, as long as you are in a safe and supportive environment.

Determine how much to share. Several techniques can help you decide how much to share.

Sharing Circle – Not all relationships are created equal. You may share different details with strangers than you would with acquaintances and friends.

Red light, Yellow light, Green light Strategy – Tool to help you decide what to say in each sharing circle.

- Green light = Statements made to anyone
- Yellow light = Slow down and think about the consequences
- Red light = Stop unless you trust someone or there is a specific purpose for sharing

Ways to be effective for the audience in sharing (Do's & Don'ts):

DO	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Share what helped you personally• Highlight the outcome of your journey and what gave you strength in your recovery• Maintain a future oriented vision (translate anger into ideas/possibilities for change)
DON'T	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide direct advice• Focus on the details of the event, but more on the outcome• Assume that everyone is at the same stage as you in their healing and recovery• Assume that everyone goes through grief in the same way• Expect that what is comforting to you will be the same for others

How to respond to questions from other victims:

You may feel very confident about the information you plan to share and about your own story, but sometimes questions or comments from others can feel inappropriate or uncomfortable. Some potential ways to respond to these types of questions include:

- Restate your purpose and move on ("Let's focus our attention on the purpose of the gathering today, which is...")
- Open the question up to the entire group ("Let's see what others have to say about this...")
- Generalize the questions to the larger issue ("We have learned that we can better support these families by...")
- Do not answer if you feel uncomfortable ("I would prefer to keep that private. Thank you for understanding.")

Preparing for the event:

There are several activities that are important to help you prepare for the event, to ensure that your involvement is the most effective and healing for both you and the audience.

- Clarify the purpose, audience, and logistics of the event
- Ask about your specific role and responsibilities
- Engage in training on ways to work with distressed families
- Set appropriate boundaries with other survivors and families (*if applicable*). These might include boundaries about time spent with survivors and emotional engagement with families
- Become educated and knowledgeable on cultural considerations surrounding the event and audience

Develop a Safety Plan

It can be helpful to have a safety plan in place in the event you become triggered or have an emotional health need while providing peer support or outreach. Triggers can happen unexpectedly and can differ by time, person, or situation. Some items to include in your safety plan:

- Talking to a supportive person nearby (or choosing a specific person to call)
- Developing and practicing “safe stories” (stories that you know you feel comfortable sharing), in case you suddenly become triggered but still want to share your experience
- Identifying positive coping mechanisms that help (before, during, and after you feel triggered), writing these down, and putting them into action as needed

Debriefing after the activity

Sharing your story provides a lot of opportunity for personal growth, but it is important to build in time to reflect on your experience following the activity. Debriefing can be done with a peer, a close family member, or a professional. During this time, it is important to explore how you felt about the experience, including the positive aspects and those that bothered you or were difficult during the activity.

Other ways to get involved

While sharing your story is one way to get involved after experiencing an MVI, there are other options. These can be great alternatives if you decide that sharing your story is not relevant for this event or audience, that you are not ready, or for any other reason. Some other ways to get involved include advocacy, participating in or helping to organize community events, volunteering at non-profit agencies, joining a task force for policy change, organizing a team for a local event (e.g., walk or run), or fundraising.