

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

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

### What are some ways you can share your story?

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There are multiple ways to share your story as a victim, survivor, or family member impacted by an MVI, which may help others increase their understanding of the devastating impact of mass violence incidents (MVIs), or other MVI survivors’ healing and recovery. Some examples include:

- Speak at public events
- Provide peer support
- Attend support groups as a mentor
- Organize or participate in community activities
- Speak at small group meetings
- Join task forces for policy changes
- Speak to or be a spokesperson in the media
- Share in online forums or through social media venues

### What are your reasons to share your story?

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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 that it:

- Personalizes the loss and trauma
- Validates the significant impact of MVIs on survivors, their families and communities
- Helps make sense and meaning out of personal experiences
- Helps change stereotypes and assumptions, and reduces stigma
- Engages one’s imagination and helps discover new possibilities for recovery
- Helps build relationships and establish a supportive community
- Can lead to growth and change in one’s life and in the lives of others
- Can increase understanding about one’s culture and identity

### Risks of sharing your story

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While sharing your story can be helpful, there are inherent risks that – if not recognized and reduced – can be very harmful, including:

- Being labeled as a “survivor” or “victim” and being “put into a box” with this label
- Increased feelings of vulnerability
- “Trauma cues” that can bring up unresolved trauma
- Experiencing sharing *remorse*
- Making listeners feel uncomfortable
- Stress, burnout or secondary victimization
- Risk of criticism from people who don’t understand or care to understand

In addition, sharing online comes with a unique set of risks. In online forums (e.g., social media venues, 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; finding one that already exists; or posting about your personal experiences anonymously or using an alias.

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

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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, and/or to keep private?
- What do you hope your audience’s response will be?
- What specific actions do you want your audience take as a result of learning about your lived experience?
- What are the potential benefits of and risks to sharing your story?

### How to develop your story:

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**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 lived experiences in any way that is helpful, and not potentially harmful, to you or your audience. 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 effectively share your story (Do’s & Don’ts):

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<b>DO</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share what personally helped you</li> <li>• Address the impact of MVIs on survivors and their families – physical, mental, behavioral, financial, social and spiritual</li> <li>• Highlight the outcomes of your journey and what gave you strength in your recovery</li> <li>• Maintain a future-oriented vision (translate anger into ideas/possibilities for change)</li> </ul>
<b>DON’T</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide direct advice but, rather, provide helpful information based upon your personal lived experience</li> <li>• Focus on the details of the event, but more on the outcome(s)</li> <li>• Assume that everyone is at the same stage as you in their healing and recovery</li> <li>• Assume that everyone goes through grief in the same way</li> <li>• Expect that what is comforting to you will be the same for others</li> </ul>

## How to respond to questions from other victims:

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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 for discussion ("Let's see what others have to say about this...")
- Generalize the questions to the larger issues ("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" or "I am not comfortable addressing that; thank you for understanding.")

## Preparing for the event:

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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:
  - Who are the sponsors?
  - Who will introduce you, and what type of biographical information would be most helpful?
  - What do *they* hope to achieve by having you share your lived experience? Do *their* expectations align with your personal goals?
  - How long will you speak?
  - If you want to include multimedia resources in your presentation, what does your sponsor need to know and prepare?
  - What is the set-up of the room, i.e., classroom style, tables, horseshoe, etc.?
  - Who do they expect will be in the audience, i.e., other survivors, victim service providers, justice professionals, community members, or a combination of these?
  - Will there be opportunities for "questions-and-answers"?
  - Will there be an evaluation form for attendees to complete?
  - Will the event be audiotaped or videotaped and, if so, do the sponsors have your permission to use footage for outreach to which you agree in advance?
  - Will any media be present and, if so, which media professionals plan to attend? Will there be a "press availability" following your remarks?
- Ask about your specific role and responsibilities
- Engage in training about 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 about cultural considerations surrounding the event and audience

## Develop a Safety Plan

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

- Bring a friend, family member or trusted professional for personal support
- Talk to your supportive person before and after your remarks (or choose a specific person to call)
- Develop and practice "safe stories" (stories that you know you feel comfortable sharing), in case you suddenly react to a trauma cue but still want to share your experience

- Identify positive coping mechanisms that help (before, during, and after you feel any stress), write these down, and put them into action as needed

### **Review your presentation when it is over**

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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. You can review your experience with a peer, a close family member, or a professional. During this time, it is important to explore how you felt about the experience; the positive aspects; any aspects that bothered you or were difficult during the activity; and/or anything you would do differently. It is also a good idea to check in with the activity's sponsor(s), and solicit feedback from them.

### **Other ways to get involved**

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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 something you are prepared to do, that you are not ready for at this specific time, 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, activities involving the arts, or any events that raise public awareness about MVIs), or fundraising.